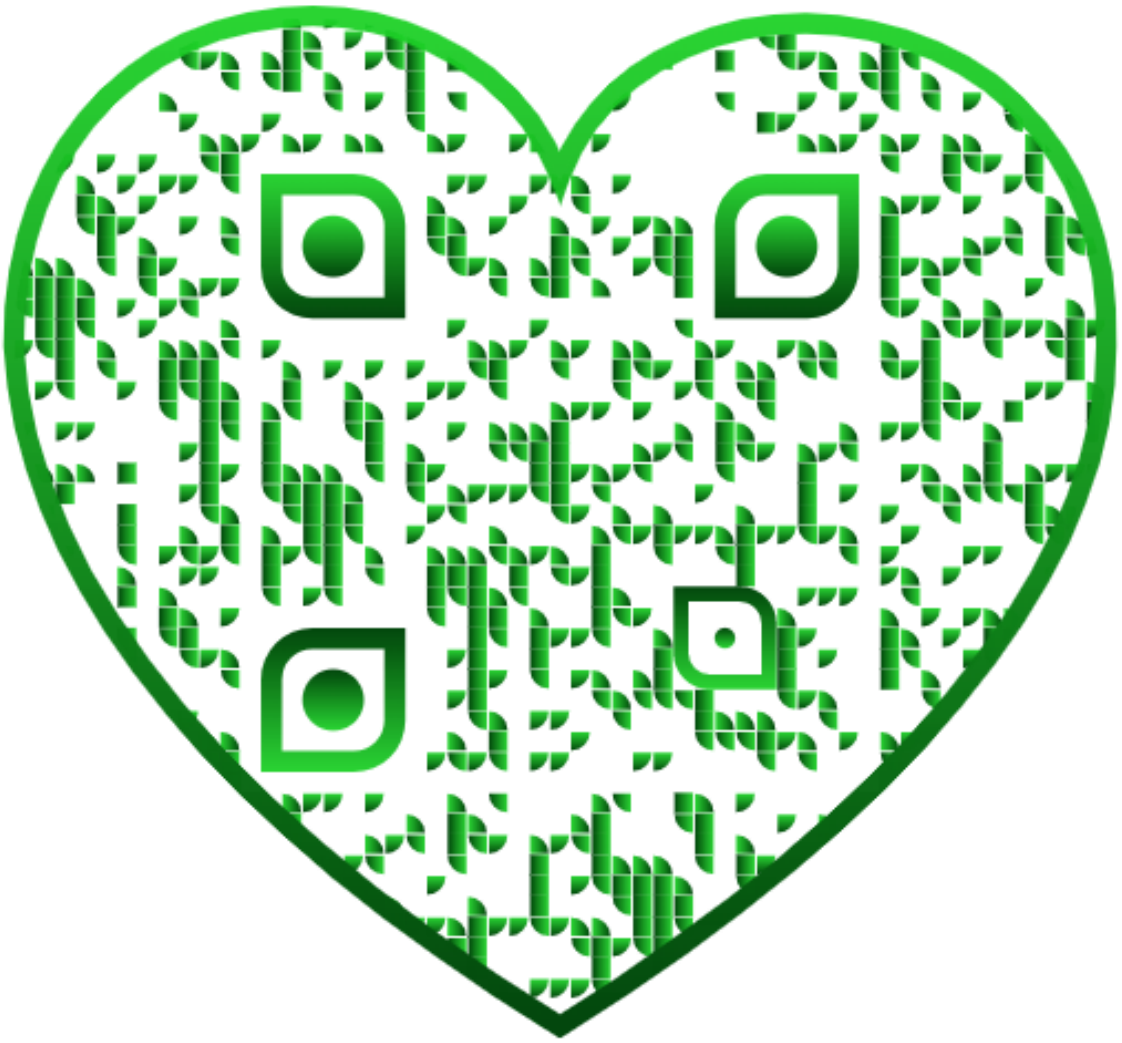
THE SECRET HISTORY OF HERMES TRISMEGISTUS

Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times

FLORIAN EBELING

Foreword by JAN ASSMANN

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY DAVID LORTON



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Foreword

Jan Assmann

Hermeticism is one of the undercurrents of Western cultural memory; it has never been a main current, but neither has it been entirely marginal or entirely forgotten. The common thesis that it was a rediscovery of the Renaissance, something of which the Middle Ages had no inkling, is convincingly refuted in this book. To be sure, the appearance of a manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and its translation by Marsilio Ficino, completed in 1463, did, in fact, signify an intellectual revolution and established, at least in Florence and northern Italy, a Hermetic tradition with a character all its own. But there had been three lines of tradition in which the Hermetic body of thought had subsisted throughout the Middle Ages: citations by the Church Fathers (especially Lactantius and Clement of Alexandria), the tractate "Asclepius" in Latin translation, and texts that had already been translated from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Florian Ebeling can thus distinguish two currents of Hermetic tradition. The one, which was based on the writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* was at home in Italy and spread from there throughout Europe, and the other, which was based in particular on the *Tabula Smaragdina* and other originally Arabic texts, had its center north of the Alps. Italian Hermeticism understood itself as a philosophy closely related to Neoplatonism, whereas, beyond the Alps, Hermeticism viewed itself as a practical, alchemical-medical science. Only the appeal to Hermes Trismegistus was common to both traditions. Until now, scholars have always understood the rubric "Hermetic tradition" to refer to the Hermeticism of the Florentine Renaissance and the history of its influence and adoption. Now, however, Florian Ebeling's discovery of an independent northern Hermeticism has fundamentally altered and expanded our understanding of Hermetic traditions. This book not only summarizes what is already known about

Hermeticism but also sketches a wholly new picture of this topic. In his Heidelberg dissertation, basing himself on a text corpus of well over a hundred partly known and partly unknown alchemical tractates of the seventeenth century, Ebeling recovered the outlines of an independent image of Egypt in which that land was not an ancient, dead culture but a living tradition that could be inherited and carried on. Thus, for instance, Paracelsus could be understood as a new Hermes. This image of Egypt is that of the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons, as we encounter it, for instance, in Mozart's *Magic Flute.*

Hermes Trismegistus was considered to be an Egyptian sage, a fact that makes the Hermetic tradition so extraordinarily interesting for Egyptology. Among the traditions and memorable figures that have kept various images of ancient Egyptian civilization alive in Western cultural memory, Hermes Trismegistus is the most important, and the image of Egypt he represents is the most magnificent. For the West, along with the Hebrew Moses and the Greek Plato, there has always been, though only seldom on the same level, the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus. As archetype of a third position between Christianity and paganism, Hermes Trismegistus had his finest hour in the Renaissance, in the framework of the tradition of *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) founded by Marsilio Ficino. For more than a hundred years it seemed as though the exclusivity of Christian monotheism, with its sharp distinction between religion and idolatry, and between orthodoxy and heresy, was allowing itself to be sublimated into a comprehensive, universalist perspective—until, in the course of the Counter-Reformation, the boundaries were closed again, and Francesco Patrizi and his books ended up on the Index, Tommaso Campanella in jail, and Giordano Bruno at the stake. In the framework of *prisca theologia,* Hermes Trismegistus was a prominent, and at times the greatest, vehicle of a revelation granted by God not only to Jews and Christians but also to pagans.

The major problem of Hermeticism is that, on the one hand, the various traditions invoking Hermes can scarcely be reconciled with one another, whereas, on the other hand, some of these traditions resemble, to the point of confusion, other movements that do not mention Hermes. There is no "Hermeticism" in the sense of a unique and distinct movement or of a single philosophical system. Ebeling makes this point clear in his book. The alchemo-Paracelsism he describes here for the first time was an

independent Hermetic tradition with almost nothing in common with the platonizing Hermeticism that originated in Florence. Although certain common elements stand out, they are not exclusively "Hermetic" but can be found in other traditions as well.

It seems to me that the most important element in Hermetic tradition is the motif of revelation. The various Hermetic discourses do not draw their authority from the persuasive power of their arguments but from their appeal to a higher revelation that lies beyond mundane reason. They set this revelation on a par with that of the Bible, and if the Hermetists can show that the Bible and the texts they ascribe to Hermes Trismegistus agree in the essential points of their theology and cosmology, then clearly both stem from the same divine source of revelation. Hermetic discourse is revelatory discourse. It proceeds from above to below, from a higher standpoint inaccessible to that of ordinary reason, in a solemn and authoritative tone. In late antiquity, from which the oldest of these texts stem, this tone was common far beyond Hermeticism. At that time the "book market" was flooded with texts that purported to be works of towering, semidivine figures from a primeval time near to that of the gods. These "pseudepigrapha" were not viewed as crude forgeries but as signals of a specific tradition to which appeal was made. Truth was more a matter of antiquity and origin than of coherence and evidence, a principle that has characterized Hermetic traditions down to their contemporary, postmodern manifestations. These reasons proved to be the undoing of Hermes Trismegistus, when his pseudepigraphic character was convincingly exposed by Isaac Casaubon in the year 1614. Along with the proof of his antiquity, his pretension to veracity and his prophetic character came crashing down.

Whereas the classical Hermetic writings did not make a central point of their venerable age but derived their revelatory quality more from the divine rank of their author, the issue of antiquity became a decisive criterion of truth in the framework of Christian chronology. Greater age meant higher truth. The best knowledge was the oldest knowledge. As a result, Hermetic knowledge came to be viewed as rescued primeval knowledge, the wisdom of Adam, that had in some way survived the Flood. Various ancient legends could be cited on this point. Josephus Flavius recounted that the grandchildren of Adam, the sons of Seth, had inscribed this primeval knowledge on two columns, one of them made of bricks in case of an

outbreak of fire, the other of stone in case of a catastrophic flood. The column of stone survived the Flood and supposedly could still be seen in Syria. (Pseudo)-Manetho distinguished two figures named Hermes. The first wrote his wisdom in hieroglyphs on stelae. After the Flood, the second, son of Agathodaimon and father of Tat, deposited this wisdom in the temples in the form of books written in Greek. And Ammianus Marcellinus wrote that the wise men of Egypt, anticipating a catastrophic flood, prepared subterranean galleries and caves, and covered their walls with hieroglyphic inscriptions in which all their wisdom was recorded. These were typical legends that had come to be attached in late antiquity to the mysterious, ruined monuments of Egypt and then were richly embellished by medieval Arab writers; from these sources they passed into alchemo-Paracelsism and into the lore of the Rosicrucians and Freemasons.

Behind these legends of the founding of Hermeticism stood a conviction that knowledge had been lost. The story of this loss in the *Sapientia Adamica* is the alchemical, Paracelsic counterpart to Ficino's conception of *theologia prisca.* In both cases there is a genealogy of knowledge, with Ficino in one case, and Paracelsus in the other, being the great modern collector and restorer of the scattered sparks of the original light. In both traditions Plato had a central role; both play him off against Aristotle, and both schools of thought saw themselves as a *philosophia pia,* a unity of religion and science, theology and philosophy, research and piety. This pessimistic, backward-looking concept of knowledge and tradition, which localized all knowledge in the Beginning, after which things could only go downhill, and according to which wisdom and research consisted in catching hold of these scattered sparks, characterized, inter alia, the philosophy of history of the Illuminati of the later eighteenth century. In the context of the Hermetic tradition, revelation was thus legitimized through a privileged contact not with the hereafter (by way of visions, as in the case of Emanuel Swedenborg, who otherwise stood so close to this tradition) but with the Origin.

The concept of revelation entails an attitude toward the world that I wish to call "hypercosmism." From antiquity on, all Hermetic traditions have insisted on the revelatory character of nature, on the divinity of the world as a work of God, and on the ever graded levels of presence or "immanence" of God in all things; at the same time, however, in Hermetic thought of all periods, it is clear that the essence and truth of God are not bound up in the

things of the world, that they cannot be comprehended by human reason or described with human speech. This hypercosmism characterizes not only Jewish, Muslim, and Christian belief in a transcendent God but also the pagan monotheism of late antiquity, whose typical theological forms of discourse are revelatory addresses in the form of oracles (e.g., in Macrobius) or didactic dialogues (as in the *Corpus Hermeticum*). This transcendent or "hypercosmic" concept of God (the concept is ancient and stems from Vettius Agorius Praetextatus) that distinguishes between "encosmic" and "hypercosmic" gods is the deepest common denominator between Christianity and Hermeticism, and it was the basis of the latter's adoption in the framework of the Christian culture of the West.

In the Hermetic traditions, the motif of revelation is bound up with the motif of secrecy. In ordinary language this motif came to characterize the notion of "Hermetic" (as the mysterious, the inaccessible, the self-contained). This stress on secrecy distinguishes Hermetic from biblical revelation. In the biblical tradition, revealed knowledge was intended for general distribution. The Torah given to Moses at Sinai was to be learned by heart and studied day and night by all the people of Israel, and the revelation of Christ was proclaimed to all peoples. The strictest secrecy, however, underlay Hermetic revelation. For that reason, unlike the Torah, it was codified not in the letters of an alphabet but in hieroglyphs: from late antiquity to the nineteenth century these pictorial symbols were understood to be a medium of enciphering ideas independent of language, notwithstanding that the preserved texts were themselves written in (or "translated into") Greek, Latin, or Arabic.

In the imagination of the Hermetists, hieroglyphs performed three functions: that of arcanizing, of denoting ideas independent of language, and of immediate signification. The concept of "arcanizing" refers to the function of maintaining secrecy. In this regard, hieroglyphs function as a cryptography that discloses its meaning only to the initiated. In his wellknown critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* and in his Seventh Letter, Plato denounced what he took to be an especially grave deficiency of written communication: that it does not distinguish between the initiated and the uninitiated, thus exposing its message to all sorts of misuse and misunderstanding. Hieroglyphic writing that can be read only by the initiated counters this deficiency. As a medium of denoting ideas, hieroglyphs stand in opposition to phonetic scripts, which represent the

sequence of sounds in spoken language. Ancient writers such as Diodorus and Plotinus had already stressed that hieroglyphs did not refer to syllables and words but to concepts and ideas. Finally, the notion of "immediate signification," coined by Aleida Assmann, refers to the distinction introduced by Plato between "natural" (*physei*) and "conventional" (*thesei*) signs. Natural signs denote the signified by means of a natural and thus immediate relationship, whereas conventional signs do so indirectly via a code agreed upon by society. Since Aristotle, it has seemed certain that writing and speech proceed according to the principle of mediated signification. The Hermetic traditions, however, regarded hieroglyphs as natural signs that stood in an immediate relationship to the world, and, for these traditions, the world was a cosmos of signs and a system of relationships in which each thing was imprinted with the "signature" of its meaning. Adam, who gave names to the creatures, knew how to "read" them, and this knowledge survived the Flood and the decline of ancient cultures to be handed down to the present era through the currents of Hermetic tradition.

For all these reasons the Hermetic traditions, and above all the alchemoParacelsic tradition, regarded themselves as a nondiscursive philosophy communicated through symbols. We encounter the concept of a "*philosophia dià symbólo¯n*" already in Philo of Alexandria. In his biography of Moses he writes that Moses was initiated into Egyptian "philosophy, communicated through symbols," during his upbringing as a prince in Pharaoh's court.

Along with revelation and secrecy, "initiation" is the third concept unceasingly connected with the Hermetic traditions. Initiation is much more than a communication of knowledge. It involves not only knowing the hieroglyphic code, the enigmatic protective shell of Hermetic wisdom, but also demonstrating that one is worthy of this knowledge. The reason for the arcanizing of Hermetic knowledge was concern that it might fall into unworthy hands. Initiation was thus, above all, a test of worthiness that preceded the conveying of knowledge and constituted its necessary presupposition. Knowledge was to be communicated only to the worthy. Worthiness was not a question of knowledge but of virtue. This caution was connected with the special power ascribed to natural symbols. On the basis of thinking in terms of references and analogies, rather than causal relationships, Hermeticism developed a theory of the coherence of the

world that could be put to practical use, magically, mystically, and medically, but, above all, alchemically, for refining metals, prolonging life, achieving earthly bliss—in short, for producing the Philosophers' Stone. The framework of immediate signification was a far better guide to the secrets of Nature than that of conventional science.

These and many other motifs are common, but not exclusive, to the Hermetic traditions; they are also found in contexts in which Hermes Trismegistus plays no role. The Paracelsic doctrine of signatures and thinking in analogies, for example, reappears in the later eighteenth century in the work of Emanuel Swedenborg, and the doctrine of universal oneness resembles the thought of the pantheists and of the followers of Spinoza. The project of a writing system denoting concepts (*Begriffsschrift,* "concept writing") fascinated Leibniz and other seventeenth-century philosophers, whereas the Egyptianizing Freemasons of the late eighteenth century were concerned with the mysteries of Isis and her "veiled image at Sais," not with the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries many of these elements were taken over by movements such as theosophy and anthroposophy, which had in common the triad of revelation, secrecy, and initiation. In the multiplicity of its traditions, which cannot be subsumed under a single "system," and with its complex of concepts, forms of thought, and types of discourse, Hermeticism developed an alternative, decidedly backward-looking culture of knowledge that continued without reference to either ancient Egypt or Hermes Trismegistus; for this reason it survived the unmasking of the primeval Egyptian sage in 1614 and the decipherment, and demystification, of the Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1822. Today, with our postmodern, "anything goes" attitude, and our radical rejection of the belief in progress characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is an attraction in a backward-looking culture of knowledge like Hermeticism, which seeks its salvation in the protective recollection of origins. Perhaps the ancients not only saw much that is important to us today but also knew much that we have, in the meantime, forgotten.

Introduction

The history of Hermeticism, which begins in antiquity, has yet to come to an end. This book recounts that history, and looks at some of its most notable exponents and opponents but without losing itself in exhaustive detail. The goal is to offer an impression of the multiplicity of conceptual worlds handed down to us under the rubric of Hermeticism.

This is the first survey of this sort to date, although many works on the subject exist. At close examination, the concept of "Hermeticism" seems to elude comprehension. Many writers understand it as the history of alchemy or as various historical expressions of thinking by analogy; others consider that the term refers to the use made of the tractates of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in Italian Renaissance philosophy. There is a "philosophy of the abyss" that makes use of this name, though for many, it is simply a synonym for esotericism, magic, and occultism. Others see Hermeticism as an anthropological constant that emerged with anthropogenesis, whereas still others hold it to be the fundamental spiritual matrix of our time.

To facilitate a survey of all these diverse interpretations of Hermeticism, a pragmatic decision had to be made: thus the history recounted here is based on the works ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, the prime authority of Hermeticism, and on the works that refer implicitly to his authority, and it follows the trail this sage left behind from antiquity until today. What does the image of Hermes Trismegistus represent? What has given this figure such appeal? Why are his texts cited?

The concept of Hermeticism itself is not the subject here, although the texts will necessarily be examined in order to understand what the term "Hermeticism" has meant at varying times and in different cultural spheres. The reflections offered touch on some subjects only briefly, and a great deal is merely intimated; the intent is not to replace the many, sometimes brilliant studies that have already appeared. The reader who wishes to learn

more will find outstanding scholarly literature in the select bibliography, works that form the basis of this book and can aid in further study.

To define the content of Hermeticism strictly would entail the danger of abbreviating its history and thus losing sight of many phenomena. Perhaps Hermeticism has fascinated so many people precisely because it has made it possible to produce many analogies and relationships to various traditions: to Platonism in its many varieties, to Stoicism, to Gnostic ideas, and even to certain Aristotelian doctrines. The Gnostic, the esoteric, the Platonist, or the deist has each been able to find something familiar in the writings, and each has been able to understand what was familiar as the actual core. One just had to have a penchant for remote antiquity, for the idea of a Golden Age, in order for Hermeticism, with its aura of an ancient Egyptian revelation, to have enjoyed such outstanding success.

Hermeticism, a primeval knowledge that bore all that followed in embryonic form, a divine revelation imparted even to pagans and one that was nearly identical to Christianity, an all-embracing doctrine of reconciliation—many have understood Hermeticism in this sense, whereas others have used it as a battle cry in their struggle against Aristotelianism and other "devilish nonsense." It has been possible to appeal to Hermeticism, as Bruno did to argue for the Copernican revolution with a metaphysical pantheism; or to entrench oneself as a scientific reactionary behind a concept of revelation; or to combat deistic and progressive movements. At times Hermeticism has been a theological and philosophical preoccupation with the concept of spirit, but it has also been a concern to produce the Philosophers' Stone. Hermetic writings were used to promote the Enlightenment but also to polemicize against it.

Although this book is intended as a survey of the wealth of phenomena labeled "Hermeticism," it cannot offer everything. One focus is on the literature of Germany, and another is on the seventeenth century. Other matters are touched on only in passing or omitted entirely. This is not *the* history of Hermeticism but rather only one.

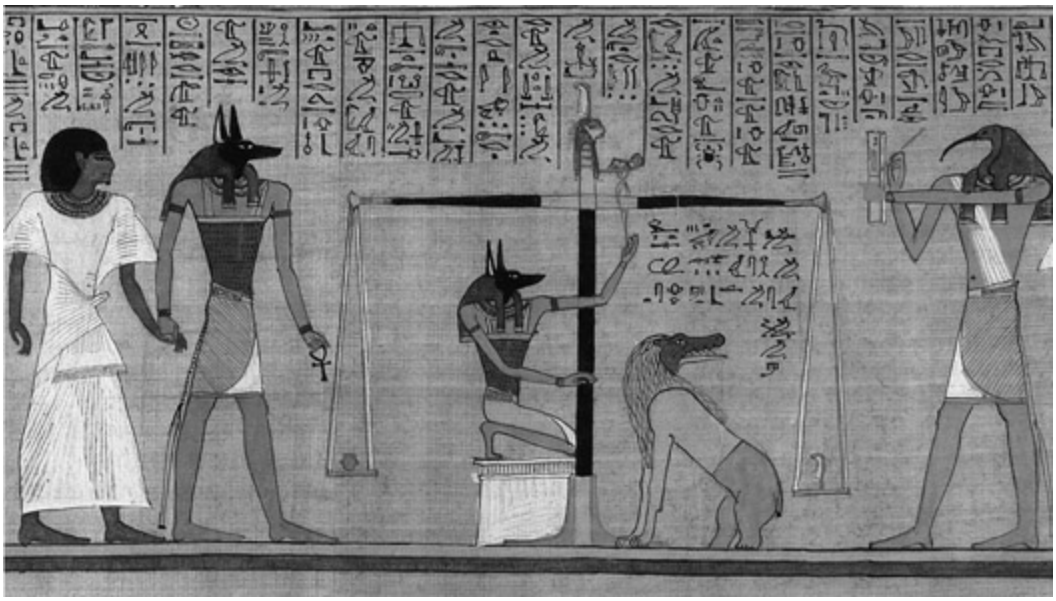
I Prehistory and Early History of a Phantasm

The eponymous patron of Hermeticism never existed: Hermes Trismegistus was a fiction, a fruitful fiction with lasting effects. The figure of this legendary Egyptian sage arose from the merging of two deities of highly divergent origin: the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek Hermes.

Thoth was one of the most important and ancient gods of Egypt. From the Old Kingdom (3700–2150 B.C.E.) on, this god, who was represented anthropomorphically but with the head of an ibis, was worshiped not only in Hermopolis Magna, the principal location of his cult, which was named after him by the Greeks, but throughout Egypt. Myth ascribed many cultural achievements to him. In the myth of the founding of the Egyptian state, he judged who should rule between Horus, the incarnation of the ruling king, and Seth, his adversary. With his invention of writing and mathematics, he not only created the basis of documentation and recollection but also instituted the basic mediums of Egyptian kingship and culture. Thoth was thus considered the universal god of wisdom and administration, and the patron god of scribes. Besides his importance as the inventor of numerous cultural technologies which made him the universal god of culture, he also had a cosmological significance. As moon god and representative of the night side of the sun god, he was revered in the Ptolemaic period for his regulation of the phases of the moon and the course of the stars.

From the ancient Egyptian point of view, the eternal needed codification: writing and the documentation of ritual gave validity to the eternal and established the reliability of culture. Thus Thoth was a representative and source of correctly and punctiliously performed ritual. In the ritual of burial and vindication, for example, Thoth, along with Anubis, was responsible for the correct performance of the burial ritual, and actually conducted the deceased into the presence of the gods. The wisdom of this "spokesman of Egypt" was also prized for its oracular nature: he was considered to be the knowing one "who foretells the morrow and foresees the future, whose act

cannot be brought to naught."[1] His wisdom and knowledge were comprehensive, he was the "one who knows the mysteries," "great of magic," and thus revered as a magical shield against the evil eye and the bites of scorpions and snakes.[2] As a luminary of the Egyptian pantheon, with special competence over writing and knowledge, only seldom did a shadow fall upon Thoth, as when he was suspected of stealing the food offerings or the property of Re or disturbing the course of time.



Thoth (*right*) watches over the Judgment of the Dead, writing down the outcome of the ceremony. Anubis, in charge of the weighing, conducts the deceased to the scale and weighs the heart of the deceased against Maat. The "Devouress" will swallow the heart if it does not stand up to the test. Vignette from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer, chap. 125. After Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead: Facsimiles of the Papyri of Hunefer* (London, 1899), plate 4.

For Homer, Hermes was the "helpful messenger of the gods" who cultivated a sense of "community with all men and gods";[3] he was god of fertility, of herds and pastures, of gymnastics and oratory. As patron of commerce and trade, he was worshiped by merchants, but he also enjoyed a more dubious notoriety as the patron god of thieves. Like Thoth, he conducted the souls of the dead in the netherworld, but he had also led Persephone in the opposite direction, out of the shadowy realm and into the

world above. This deity who crossed the border between gods and men, between this world and the next, was also endowed with the power of conjuring and magic: his “Hades’ Helmet” concealed him, and it was from his hand that Odysseus received an enchanted plant against the power of Circe. With his magic wand he could put people to sleep and awaken them. He was the “richest in gifts of the Olympians,” who had something at the ready for everyone: successful business for the merchant and a cunning deception for the thief. For some, he was god of the right moment, of the lucky find, and for others he was the epitome of false oaths, the god who, according to Hesiod, contributed “the mind of a bitch and a thievish nature” to the creation of Pandora.[4]

The herald's staff, the winged cap, the ram, and the cock are the characteristic attributes of the Greek Hermes and the Roman Mercury. From Petrus Apianus, *Inscriptiones sacrosanctae vetustatis* (Ingolstadt, 1534), p. 422.

In Hellenistic Egypt Hermes Trismegistus arose from a merging of the figures of Thoth and Hermes. After the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in the year 332 b.c.e., the Greeks in Egypt adopted the outward forms of Egyptian culture, investing them, however, with their own Greek content. In the *interpretatio graeca*, foreign deities, including those of Egypt, were understood as equivalents of Greek gods and goddesses; they were different in form but identical in essence. By that time, however, deities of different cultures had already been identified with one another. In the fifth century Herodotus wrote that Hermes and Thoth corresponded to each other, for both were considered to be tricksters, and sometimes even thieves, who, equipped with magical capabilities, were messengers of the gods and conductors of the dead.

This new Hermes, this Hermes-Thoth, was more than the sum of his parts, however. He took on a new life, and from the second century on was graced with the epithet Trismegistus, the "thrice great." His double descent from his fathers, Hermes and Thoth, is reflected in the confusing, legendary multiplicity of his functions and attributes, as reported by Diodorus Siculus in his *Bibliotheca historiae*:

> For this god was the first to bring language to perfection; he named many nameless things, invented the alphabet, and ordained ceremonies governing divine worship and sacrifices to the gods. He was the first to perceive order in the stars and to discern the nature and harmony of musical sounds. He also was the first to establish a school of wrestling and to cultivate the graceful movement and proper development of the body. [. . .] And he taught the Greeks eloquence [*hermeneia*], which is why he is called Hermes. In short, they hold him to have been the sacred scribe of Osiris, the one to whom he confided all things and on whose counsel he especially relied.[5]

Language and writing, religion and music, astronomy and techniques of physical training were traced back to Hermes Trismegistus, and he had even

advised as important a god as Osiris. As was the tradition, he acquired a noticeably human form, living among men and functioning as their teacher. This "lord of reason and rational speech" was viewed as the forefather of all wisdom, philosophy, and theology, and Egyptian priests supposedly instructed Democritus, Plato, Pythagoras, and Eudoxus in the knowledge of Hermes.

At first glance the contours of Hermes Trismegistus seem sharp, but on closer inspection they dissolve. Was he a god, like Hermes and Thoth? Many viewed him as such, but for others he was a prophet. It seems to have been in the nature, in the very essence of this fictive figure to be shimmering, iridescent, without form, for many ancient writers were unclear regarding his identity. Was there only a single Hermes Trismegistus? A text attributed to Manetho, an Egyptian priest of the third century b.c.e., tells of two figures who bore the name Hermes. The Egyptian Thoth was the first Hermes; prior to the Flood he recorded his knowledge in hieroglyphs. After the Flood the knowledge was translated from the "sacred language" into Greek and placed in the temples by the second Hermes, the son of "Agathodaimon" and father of Tat.[6] Cicero took multiplicity to the limit, reporting in his *On the Nature of the Gods* that there were five gods called Hermes, the last of whom was Hermes Trismegistus.

God, prophet, or sage? In any event, writings bearing the name of Hermes Trismegistus were handed down, and these works established the Hermetic tradition.

1. What Are Hermetic Texts?

The writings of Hermes Trismegistus are pseudepigrapha, for their alleged author did not write them. How can we establish a valid corpus of writings? How can we decide when we have a Hermetic text before us? There are essentially two ways. Some interpreters appeal to content and regard certain themes as Hermetic; where they find these themes they speak of a Hermetic text. This method, of course, first requires a definition of Hermeticism in order to recognize these supposedly Hermetic patterns of thought.

In this present volume, however, we regard, as belonging to the history of Hermeticism, all texts that refer explicitly to Hermes Trismegistus as their author or are implicitly ascribed to him. This classification is not without

problems, for each text so ascribed is considered part of a "Hermetic tradition." But it also offers advantages, because writing a history of Hermeticism means describing how this phantasm of the wise old Egyptian was passed down through the centuries, the significance assigned to him, and how the corpus of literature credited to him developed over time. It would not be useful, therefore, to designate texts that did not originate in antiquity or late antiquity as pseudo-Hermetic, distinguishing them from authentic Hermeticism. Such a distinction is unnecessary with regard to a fictive author, for this form of literature does not conform to the modern concept of authorship: even if none of the authors of Hermetic writings was actually named Hermes, there is still no reason to brand them as forgeries.

We find a similar model of inspiration in the tradition of appeals to the Muses, such as Homer's "Tell me, o Muse, of far-traveling Odysseus," or Ovid's "O gods, inspire my beginning and guide my poem." The origin of poetry is of a divine nature; it is divinely inspired. The author did not conceive of himself as a creator, a productive artistic genius, but understood himself to be only a medium. He gave shape and form to the text, but its substance was of transcendent origin. Those who held Hermes Trismegistus to be the author of a text believed that Hermetic tradition embodied a knowledge inspired by Hermes Trismegistus himself. There is little reason to doubt that the authors of Hermetic writings were convinced that they were passing down an age-old, devinely inspired knowledge, or that the compilers thought they had found writings deriving from the authority of Hermes.

To those who called a text "Hermetic," the name of Hermes often invoked a guideline that informed their self-understanding. They believed there was a "Hermeticism" just as there was a Platonism or Aristotelianism, and to them the question of Hermes' historicity was superfluous. He was sometimes only a prototype they invoked to characterize their own form of philosophizing. As Heinrich Noll wrote in the seventeenth century:

> I call my science "Hermetic" not only because it [. . .] conveys the thought of Hermes, but because [. . .] it proceeds according to a secret method of philosophizing whose beginnings, at least, we have in the fragments of the Egyptian Hermes, namely, in his "Tabula Smaragdina."[7]

Here the name of the author serves only as a discourse indicator. Noll uses the concept "Hermetic" to mark his position within the scientific debates of the seventeenth century. It is a matter of the plausibility of philosophemes, as they are found in the writings that supposedly stem from the legendary Egyptian; it is not a matter of a historical author.

The question of Hermes' authenticity was posed *in extenso* by the educated public only in the seventeenth century. In antiquity it was not important whether Hermes was a historical figure, though only seldom was it frankly affirmed that he was the author of all the works he supposedly had written. Iamblichus states that books in circulation that bore Hermes' name[8] were not written by him but instead were translations from the Egyptian by Greek-speaking philosophers: Egyptian-Hermetic doctrine in origin but Greek philosophy in form. Iamblichus means to say that the Egyptians traced all knowledge back to Hermes Trismegistus, thus making clear that the appearance of his name on a book does not necessarily indicate personal authorship.

Hermes was not considered an author in the sense of modern copyright law, and, in this respect, the Hermetic writings were not forgeries. A god was supposed to be worshiped as the creator of wisdom and knowledge,[9] a knowledge that was not the product of individual imagination but went beyond the individual, beyond space and time. Most important to an adorant of Hermes Trismegistus was not original intellectual creation but rather participation in divine, atemporal knowledge.

2. The Hermetic Texts of Late Antiquity

The Hermetica, at first glance, seem to be a heterogeneous collection of writings. Some are theological-philosophical texts, and others have magical, astrological, or alchemical content. At the beginning of the third century Clement of Alexandria counted the number of Hermetic writings that were carried in an ancient Egyptian cult procession. At the start of the procession were the Hermetic divine hymns and royal biography. Astrological books dealing with the fixed stars and the planets and their movements were followed by hieroglyphic inscriptions on geographical themes; following these were books dealing with education and cult practices. There were also hieratic books about the laws, the gods, and the training of priests. There were, altogether, 36 books of Hermes containing the entire philosophy of

the Egyptians, and these were complemented by 6 books on medical questions.[10] These numbers are modest compared to the 36,525 books noted by Manetho or the 20,000 mentioned by Seleucus.

Both the figure and writings of Hermes Trismegistus were the product of the syncretic, Hellenistic philosophy of nature, which itself was a conglomeration of Aristotelian, Platonic, Stoic, and Pythagorean doctrines, interspersed with motifs from Egyptian mythology and themes of Jewish and Iranian origin. It seems just as impossible to strictly and systematically distinguish doctrinal content according to origin as it is to define the philosophical and theological essence of those doctrines. The entire intellectual climate of the era was characterized by an attitude of "anything goes." Emperor Hadrian wrote to the consul Servianus regarding the land where the Hermetic writings originated:

> Here [in second-century Egypt] the servants of Serapis are Christians, and those who call themselves Christian bishops serve Serapis. Here there is no synagogue leader, no Samaritan, no Christian presbyter who is not also an astrologer, a soothsayer, and a quack.[11]

Out of this syncretism, how could writers create a conceptual world that resulted in a tradition which displayed, under the rubric of Hermeticism, a formal unity that endured for more than one and a half millennia? What beliefs, what ideas and themes are gathered under the concept of Hermeticism? Which texts are we actually speaking about?

> —The *Corpus Hermeticum* (*CH*) is a collection of eighteen tractates written between the first and fourth centuries c.e. and handed down, in the Greek language, in Byzantine manuscripts of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. It was, presumably, only in the Byzantine period that they were gathered together into a collection. In the eleventh century, Michael Psellus, the Byzantine philosopher, historian, politician, and monk, knew of this collection, but it had already been common in late antiquity to hand down Hermetic writings in text collections, as indicated, for example, by the thirty-six books of Hermes counted by Clement of Alexandria. That the *Corpus Hermeticum* was at least partially the result of collaborative effort can

be discerned in some of the tractates, for the individual texts often refer to one another.

—The *Asclepius* was probably written in the second or third century c.e. and is preserved to us in fullest form in a Latin translation. We have, only in fragmenary form, the Greek original titled "Perfect Discourse" (*Logos teleios,* in Greek; *Sermo perfectus,* in Latin). Parts of this text, in the Coptic language, were found in the Nag Hammadi library. In the ninth century this tractate was thought to have been written by Apuleius and was included in editions of his works. The Latin translation was available to St. Augustine, who cited it in the early fifth century. The *Asclepius* became widespread in the twelfth century, and, with a single exception, the most important manuscripts stem from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

—In the fifth century John Stobaeus compiled a *florilegium* for the education of his son. This comprehensive collection of excerpts includes many Hermetic texts, some rather lengthy.

—In 1945 a library of Coptic texts from the fourth century was discovered in the vicinity of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt; it included five Hermetica in the Sahidic dialect, two of them previously unknown.

—Fragments of Hermetic texts are also preserved in the writings of the Church Fathers. Tertullian in the third century, Lactantius in the early fourth century, and Augustine in the early fifth century handed down Hermetic *dicta* or supplied accounts of Hermetic doctrine.

—The *Hermetic Definitions* are preserved in a sixth-century Armenian translation from Greek.

—Small Hermetic fragments constantly turn up in papyri discovered in archives and libraries; in the latter half of the twentieth century, for example, three such papyri were found, two in Vienna and one in Oxford.

These texts are classified as philosophical-theological. Many others, previously designated "popular" or "vulgar" Hermetica, today are called "technical" Hermetica to avoid making value judgments.

—Many astrological theorems and writings were ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus. Especially detailed is the *Book on the Thirty-six Decans,*

which perhaps dates back to the first century b.c.e.
—Hermes, the sorcerer and magus, is mentioned in the Greek magical papyri (*Papyri Graecae Magicae*), which stem mostly from the second to the fourth century. Hermes also appears as a magical healer in the so-called *Cyranidi,* from the first to fourth century.
—He was also believed to be the author of alchemical works, and apparently he played an important role as forefather of alchemy, as he is mentioned in the writings of the earliest well-known alchemist, Zosimus of Panopolis of the late third to early fourth century.

Already in late antiquity the Hermetica were a barely comprehensible accumulation of writings, and so cannot be subsumed under a single type, either formally or in content. Along with didactic dialogues on theologicalphilosophical themes, there are tractates on astronomy, alchemical formulas, and instructions for magical rituals. Can a common core be detected behind all these writings and doctrinal accounts?

Hermeticism seems more difficult to grasp than other "isms," such as Platonism or Aristotelianism. Indeed, Heinrich Dörrie has described it as a "thing without corners and edges."[12] Nevertheless all these writings were handed down under the name of Hermes Trismegistus. Can we extract a central essence from the texts?

3. Hermes as Preacher of Theology and Philosophy

Poimander: *The Unity of Knowledge of the World, the Self, and God*

The first tractate of the *Corpus Hermeticum*,[13] probably from the second century, mentions Hermes Trismegistus in its title but is otherwise called *Poimander* or *Pymander*, a name that has often been applied to the entire collection of texts. The content of the text is embedded in a frame narrative; in an introductory dialogue the first-person narrator tells of mystical visions in which the divine spirit (*nous*), called Poimander, reveals and explains the essence of nature and man. The text ends with a missionary charge to the narrator to convey his acquired knowledge to the world.

Three stages lead from the Truth beheld by the narrator in a vision, via spoken language, to the text at hand. The first stage is the mystical vision, the narrator's recognition of Truth itself; the second is Poimander's

explanatory words, in the *logos*, the rational speech that makes the vision comprehensible to man. Hermes' preaching of this knowledge is the third stage. At the beginning, then, is the actual Truth, the vision of the divine, which cannot be depicted in words. At the end are the verbal explanation and written description, which are not themselves the Truth but only interpret and indicate it. In the literary fiction the missionary concern with this knowledge remains exclusive: a teacher passes it on to a student, for the divine, Hermetic knowledge is intended only for a select few.

The topic of the dialogue is a cosmology and, building on that, an anthropology. Underlying both is a common theological concept. The world is composed of two polar principles: one is matter, the world of darkness and chaos, "damp nature," and the other is light, the ordering principle, God or the divine spirit. Man and the world arose from the combining of these polar opposites. Although God himself is transcendent, as spirit that radiates into matter and forms it as *logos*, he is also omnipresent, and all being has its existence only through him. A myth relates how the world itself developed out of these poles. God did not create the world himself but only through the mediation of two "sons," the noetic, spiritual models of the visible, material world. The demiurgic spirit (*nous*) was the model of the world, the cosmos, and the incorporeal protohuman was the model of man. The spiritual models were "dies," ordering principles for the material realm; from these ideal, spiritual origins arose the world and man as a living unity of spirit and body. God is in the world, and thus is indirectly present in the cosmos and in man; he is the original ordering principle at work in, on, and through matter. The course of the world is also an indirect work of God: the seven planetary spheres surround the visible cosmos, governing it with the help of Fate (*heimarmene*). The circular movements of the planets bring forth, initiated by spirit, the living creatures, though they themselves are without spirit. In the world thus created, there rules a hierarchy of being. The lower elements, largely caught up in matter, chaos, and darkness, are without *logos* and thus are lacking in spirit and the effect of God; the higher, spiritual beings, however, are closer to God, more strongly influenced by him, and nobler.

Although the text emphasizes anthropology, it is an anthropology based on the doctrine of nature and cosmology. Spirit, meaning God, created man, "a man like himself whom he loved as his own child" (§ 12). This beloved creation of God, the spiritual-noetic model of earthly man, was empowered

by God to create, and from the stars he received power over all creatures. From the union of the image of God and nature, men were created: double beings, mortal because of their corporeality and yet immortal because of their share in, and derivation from, the spiritual. The two parts were not antagonistic but were united in love, two complementary aspects of man that together comprised the whole man and could not be separated: "for although he is immortal and has power over all, he suffers mortality as a subject of Fate" (§ 15). In primeval time each man was hermaphroditic; only in historical times were the sexes separated and was man commanded by God to reproduce.

The text ends with an ethical explanation of cosmology. It is man's task to recognize his nature as a spiritual-corporeal creature and to conduct himself accordingly. If he recognizes that he owes his essence, his spiritual nature, to his transcendent creator, he can shed his physical drives. He can leave the corporeal behind, ascend through the celestial harmonies and return the lower parts of his soul to the seven planetary spheres and enter the eighth, where he will sing the praises of God and finally merge with God himself. It is "the blessed goal for those who have attained enlightenment to become divine."

The unity of knowledge of self, God, and nature on the basis of the polar relationship of spirit and body is developed anthropologically in the *Asclepius*: man's self-knowledge requires knowledge of nature and leads necessarily to theology, for God gives form to nature. The knowing man will cause his spirit to rule over his body and praise God, and ultimately he will leave his corporeal existence behind and enter a purely spiritual mode of existence. Cosmology, anthropology, and theology can scarcely be distinguished from one another in this holistic model, with its key concepts of God, man, and cosmos.

Asclepius: *Universal Oneness and Human Dignity*

The *Asclepius* was probably composed in the second or third century c.e. The most complete version we have is a Latin translation of the Greek original, which bore the title "Perfect Discourse" (*logos teleios*), and which is preserved only in fragments and also occurs in a partial Coptic translation. Again, there is a frame narrative in this case, a conversation between Hermes, Asclepius, Ammon, and Tat regarding the statement, "all

is part of one, or one is all." This *hen kai pan* ("one and all") is the pantheistic connecting thread of the text, for even "God [is] one and all." Ethical maxims are derived from the theological, cosmological, and anthropological significance of this pantheism.

That "all is one, and the One is all" means, first of all, that individual entities have no essence or eternal being of their own. As part of the One, they are ephemeral and must perish; they are immortal only as generic entities. Man, however, is a special, individual entity: Hermes praises him as a "great wonder, a living being that deserves worship and praise" (§ 5). As he is both spirit and body according to his nature, man has two destinies: as a physical being he must cultivate the earth, and as a spiritual being he must acquire knowledge of God and nature:

> He cultivates the earth [and] mingles with the elements thanks to the quickness of his thought, with his mental capacity he descends into the depths of the sea. He is free to do anything: heaven does not seem inaccessibly high [. . .] (§ 6) [. . .] so that this living being, so formed, can do justice to his two origins: to admire and adore the heavenly, and to tend to and guide the earthly (§ 8).

Spirit endows man with freedom and dignity, for it stems from the *Quinta Essentia*, the Ether. He is thus not sublunar, not subject to destiny and necessity, like all that is material and earthly. Glorifying the spirit, however, does not mean holding the human body in contempt, for it is also man's task to care for the created, physical world with this mortal part of himself and, as the "third God," to regard and revere "the second God," the cosmos (§ 10). Man's corporeality and mortality is thus not a deficiency but an added quality. Man, as both body and spirit, must do justice to the respective tasks of each side of his essence: with his body he must care for the world, the beautiful order of the cosmos, and, with his soul, praise and extol God for the beneficent order of all Being.

This caring for the world is not only a pleasure but is also a burden. Man, who is essentially spirit, wishes, in the end, to be freed from his corporeality through death, to ascend into the spiritual realm, never to become mortal again. Only the pious can expect to return to their divine origin; all others, after death, are reborn in another body. Only man, of all the creatures, is so distinguished; he alone possesses, along with his body

and his soul, which is nourished by the *pneuma*, the spirit that must gain control over the body. As compared with the gods and pure intelligences, man possesses a body so as to cultivate the earth, and in relation to beings that are merely mortal, he is distinguished by his spirit. This unique and powerful position displays itself, among other ways, in man's ability to make living images of the gods:

> statues ensouled and conscious, filled with spirit and doing great deeds; statues that foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams. (§ 24)

Thus the human body is not an object of contempt. Rather, it is a compelling, effective means of structuring and maintaining the world; indeed, even the sexual act is valorized as a reflection of the divine act of creation. But the body never emancipates itself from the rule of the spirit. This point is made clear, *ex negativo*, in an apocalyptic vision that depicts a world in which man's spirit no longer leads him to pious practices. A time will come when the gods abandon Egypt, this land of exemplary piety; only the wicked angels will remain, and chaos will reign over the earth. The Nile will abandon its bed, the course of the stars will become disordered, and other catastrophes will occur. Men will no longer fulfill their task of worshiping God, and foreigners will dwell in Egypt. But after the land is finally devastated by floods, fire, wars, and pestilence, God will restore its former condition, and the "rulers of the world," the gods, will again take up residence in the west of Egypt. The world and man, as this vision makes clear, are constantly threatened. The meaningful and beautifully ordered cosmos can disintegrate if man does not act piously and wisely, if he does not extol God as the creator and protector of the cosmos. Man's care for the cosmos is imperative and results from his discerning, pious practices. The *Asclepius*, like the *Poimander*, thus ends with a prayer.

Here, too, we recognize a polarity in the world order, an opposition of divine spirit and dark matter. Man's body, however, is not stigmatized; he is not required to practice asceticism; he is even encouraged to perform the sexual act. The world, with regard to its material side, is good and beautiful, and man must use his body to take care of it. Primacy, however, lies with his spirit, which stems directly from God and guarantees man's freedom and his dignity.

Man, as both spirit and body, is a unique entity within the cosmos. He belongs to the highest realm, but if he surrenders rule over his spirit, he will degenerate to the lowest. All depends on the individual man and his decisions; he must make use of his freedom to align himself with the theological, the natural, and the philosophical order.

The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead: *Initiation into the Hermetic Mysteries*

The library of Coptic texts discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt contained some previously unknown Hermetica from the fourth century, including *The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead*.[14] In it are the prerequisites for the success of mystical vision.

Hermes instructs his disciple regarding the step-by-step spiritual ascent to true knowledge. Truth and the path to beholding God cannot simply be learned, however, for there are appropriate intellectual and moral prerequisites, and adequate preparation is needed. The first step has to do with distancing oneself from the world, with freedom from base physical drives. One must engage in pious practices and live according to the laws of God, thus fulfilling a necessary condition for mystic vision. Only those who fear God can hope to be elevated, in prayer to God, into the Ogdoad, which leads to truth and wisdom. Hermes pronounces such a prayer, invoking God with a magical name: "Zoxathazo AAΩΩEEΩΩΩHHH[…]ΩΩΩΩΩΩΩ Zozazoth." Hermes then prays for wisdom, and for God to recognize the *pneuma* in him and his disciple and accept their spiritual sacrifice, closing with words that expound inner, pneumatic man as the essential core and object of mystical rapture: "Save the one who is in us, and give us immortal wisdom."[15] The disciple and teacher then embrace, followed by the desired ecstatic vision. Aware of himself as spirit, Hermes beholds the power and source of all Being. But this vision, Hermes stresses, cannot be adequately expressed in words: "I have seen; speech cannot reveal it. For the Ogdoad, my son, and the souls and angels in it sing a hymn of praise in silence. But I, the spirit, I understand."[16]

Hermes' knowledge of God cannot be directly expressed in words. Spirit can understand God and his perfect truth by beholding him but cannot express him in words. Thus the reader learns nothing about the content of the vision. The ensuing mystical vision of the disciple is also described only in terms of its effects on the disciple and the teacher, not in terms of its

content, "[f]or it is right before God that we be silent about that which is hidden."[17] God is praised as Power and Good, as the creator of *logos* and love, but all these are qualities of God that refer to the world and to God in his capacity as creator. The essential being of God cannot be described in words.

In the mystical vision Hermes and his disciple are pure spirit, part of the divine spirit, and, in this respect, they are merged with God. The concept of mystical vision, however, is not a matter of self-deification. The follower can prepare himself for the vision only by leading a pious life; he cannot force it. He is led by God himself to the highest form of knowledge; it is not in the disciple's power to create this vision for himself, for it is not at man's discretion to see his creator directly. Only God acts and grants it to the worthy one, who must then be content with the knowledge that he is only a creature (*natura naturata*) in God's (God as *natura naturans*) creation.

This passive model of knowledge of God does not mean withdrawal from the world but is linked, instead, to a missionary call. At the end of the frame narrative, after his vision of God, the disciple promises to extol him in an "imperishable book": "My son, write this book for the temple of Diospolis in characters of the scribes of the House of Life [i.e., in hieroglyphs], calling it *The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead*."[18] It is to be written in hieroglyphs on a turquoise-colored stela, and winged sun disks with theriomorphic heads are to guard the stela; an oath is to conclude the book, to protect it from improper use.

Therefore, as the frame narratives of Hermetic writings seldom weary of emphasizing, pious and discreet adepts can share in this secret tradition. Mission through concealment seems to be the paradoxical point. On the one hand, true knowledge of God, man, and nature is to be carried into the world, but, in contradiction, this very knowledge is characterized as decidedly exclusive. Divine knowledge, namely, knowledge of God, must not be divulged to the profanity of the world.

Kore Kosmu: *The Destiny of the Soul*

Up to now the disciple has been introduced to the basic doctrines of Hermeticism and has learned his purpose as a man and how he beholds God; indeed, he can experience himself as part of the divine. It seems as though one could almost write a Hermetic dogmatics or at least construct a

solid Hermetic curriculum, but the Hermetic writings are not consistent. A prime example of this inconsistency is Fragment XXIII, the longest handed down by Stobaeus, titled *Kore Kosmu*. The contradictory notions in the *Corpus Hermeticum* are especially pronounced within this tractate and in its relationship to other Hermetic texts.

At the center of this doctrinal dialogue between Isis and Horus is a myth regarding the creation and development of the soul, especially the human soul. God, after creating nature, established an upper part of the cosmos for "pneumatic beings." Out of the divine *pneuma*, and out of fire and other, unnamed materials, and by means of mysterious spells, he prepared an invisible material which he called "inspiration." From some of this material God formed souls in sixty gradations: they could be higher and purer or lower and less pure, though all were immortal. These souls were assigned to a celestial sphere, Heaven, where they would be allowed to remain provided they did not rebel against God; in the event of disobedience, they could be punished. Out of some of the remaining "spiritual stuff" God formed the anthropomophic and theriomorphic signs of the zodiac, and, from the rest, the higher and purer souls created the animals. These souls, after creating the animals, became arrogant, for they were incapable of self-knowledge. They no longer wished to remain in the celestial sphere assigned to them, and so they rose up against God's command and forsook their place in Heaven. As punishment for their hubris, God created "the object Man" within which he imprisoned these souls.

God's creation of man was not merely to punish these souls, however. Lamenting the fact that he had not been praised for his creations, he decided to use Hermes as intermediary to convene an assembly of the gods. The gods thought that man should be fashioned in order to praise God's creation, and each planetary deity would contribute something to this creation. Thus the planetary gods (§ 28 f.) endowed man, even before his creation by God, with good and bad qualities, and only then did Hermes, at God's command, create man—from the same "soul-froth" out of which the animals had previously been created. After God and Hermes approved of this creation, God commanded the souls to embody themselves in man. Thus, on the one hand, anthropogenesis was punishment for the rebellious souls, and, on the other hand, God would thereby be praised.

God, however, limited the suffering of the souls imprisoned in the human bodies. Though love making and necessity ruled the destiny of the man, the

souls had the prospect of returning to Heaven if they were not guilty of serious transgressions in the course of their earthly lives. If they transgressed, they would be born again in a human body or, in the case of an especially wicked offense, in the body of an animal. The souls were dissatisfied with this arrangement, for they wanted to return to Heaven. They used their bodies as a way to instigate a rebellion, which led to war, murder, and repression. The personified four elements complained to God about these matters and begged him to end the problem by revealing himself to man, making his will known, and civilizing the earth by means of his emanation. God thus established civilization and let himself be seen in the divine pair Isis and Osiris; but Isis, who recounts the myth, must be silent about everything else. The divine cultural achievements of Isis and Osiris laid the basis for the peaceful and God-fearing cooperation of men in a civilized society. Law, as well as divine and mortuary cult, originated with this divine couple, who established oaths and adherence to contracts. It was they who disclosed the divine nature and structure of the cosmos, that is, they "introduced all arts, sciences, and cultural activities to men and were their lawgivers" (§ 68). They had learned from Hermes that the lower had been made by the creator in relation to the higher, and they established cults corresponding to the "mysteries in Heaven." They ordained philosophy and magic for the souls, and medicine for the bodies. Isis and Osiris addressed a hymn to God to celebrate this happy outcome of the rebellion of the souls and their pacification through culture.

The text as a whole is enigmatic, as is its title which has still not been explained satisfactorily. Also enigmatic is the myth of the origin and destiny of the souls. Evidently two inadequately combined myths are related here. First, anthropogenesis is a punishment God imposes on the souls for violating his command. The actual goal of these souls is apparently to return to Heaven, and not the welfare of the cosmos and the earth. Still the earth, as a whole, is not ontotheologically devalued: it is not a place from which the divine is distant. It was such, of course, in prehistoric times, when the souls, with the help of their human bodies, rebelled against God. But God provided for the earth, bestowing his emanation on it in the form of civilizing gods, and he pacified the world and the incarnated souls. As the locus of civilization, the earth became a place of divine rule and order. This myth of the creation of man depicts the history of the souls, their disposition in the world and their postmortal

yearning for Heaven. The other creation story recounts how man was created in order to praise creation. Here we see the disposition of man, as we know it from the other Hermetic writings.

A Doctrinal Account: Iamblichus's Neoplatonic Interpretation of Hermeticism

Along with the texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, accounts of Hermetic doctrine are of great importance for the use of Hermetic ideas by later writers. Especially noteworthy among these is the account and interpretation of the Neoplatonist Iamblichus. In his work *On the Mysteries*, he investigates questions of theurgy and mantic, with numerous examples from Chaldean and especially ancient Egyptian religion. For him, Egyptian theology was largely synonymous with Hermeticism.

Iamblichus celebrates Hermes Trismegistus as a theologian and philosopher who, in his many writings, depicted the existent as "universal being" and thus propounded basic ontotheological dogma. The preexisting and sole God is the prime principle, the ground of being and intelligibility; consequently he has no share in being and intelligibility. He is *hen kai pan*, "one and all," the creator and the one exalted over his creation, endowing all existing things with being, but with no involvement of himself in this being. This prime principle caused the emanation of the first and self-sufficient God, from whom further creation emerged. This God is the cause of the being and the intelligible in the world. Then followed "gods of ether, fire, and sky." For Iamblichus, Hermes was the principal witness of a hierarchical ontology: the higher parts of the cosmos are nobler, more divine, more essential, and the lower parts are only degenerate gradations of the higher ones, noble and able to exist only in so far as they participate in the higher parts of the cosmos. Hermes conceives of the world as a divine unity that unfolds into multiplicity: "Thus, therefore, the doctrine of the Egyptians concerning principles, proceeding from on high as far as to the last of things, begins from one principle, and descends to a multitude which is governed by this one."[19] Iamblichus does not explain this relationship mythologically, as is common in many of the Hermetic writings, but by recourse to doctrines of Platonic philosophy. The ontologically higher being, God or the One, the intelligible, reason, tends generally to manifest itself in that which is lower, thereby endowing it with dignity and being. And, conversely, one may discern the spiritual in the material, the divine in

the earthly. Beginning with material entities, the discerning spirit, by means of dialectics, arrives at the intelligible and the divine. The divine manifests itself in the material and is symbolized in it, not as the divine itself but as an indication of its transcendent origin.

The distinction between material and earthly, spiritual and divine, has important consequences for the behavior of the faithful. Divine names, as they occur in theurgic practice, must not be comprehensible. They are directed not at human conventions but at divine essence and higher reason itself, which transcends bounded, human reason. And thus divine names cannot be translated, for translation has meaning only in respect to language, which belongs to the human sphere. When using divine names, human *logos* must be switched off entirely.

In psychology as well, which Iamblichus understands as part of theology and soteriology, Hermes Trismegistus is the prototypical teacher of Egyptian wisdom. In Hermes' doctrine, man possesses two souls. One has a share in the intelligible, and the other stands in relationship to the stars, is subject to their periodic movements, and, by means of these movements, influences the body. This soul climbs from the stars into the bodies of men. Only at death is it freed from the body, only then does it return to the stars, able to behold the divine. But even when it is still in man, the soul that shares in the intelligible can ascend to the gods and is not subject to destiny (8, 6); in this soul, man can liberate himself through knowledge of God and the world.

This account is of special significance to the history of the use of Hermetic concepts. Many writers have referred to it, believing it is a valid interpretation of ancient Egyptian Hermeticism. In his own account of Hermeticism, Iamblichus included many doctrines found in the writings described above, for example, the pantheistic doctrine of universal oneness, as it is expressed in the *Asclepius*, and the emphatic distinction of *topos horatos* and *topos noetos*, which for Iamblichus was correlated to the distinction between dark matter and forming spirit. In *The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead*, we find an explanation of the use of divine names, as well as the idea that the upper or spiritual part of the soul is not subject to destiny and the laws of necessity, a concept we have already encountered in the *Asclepius* and the *Poimander*. Iamblichus relates all these concepts directly to Platonic, and especially Neoplatonic, doctrines, for instance, the concept of emanations and the definition of the highest entity as beyond being and

knowledge in the sense of the Platonic "Idea of the Good." His account contributed substantially to the fact that Hermeticism came to be closely combined with Platonic doctrine.

4. Hermes: Astrologer, Magus, and Alchemist

Hermes as Astrologer

An implicit astrology is embedded in many of the Hermetic doctrines: an astrology of the planets, which impart their qualities to men; of Heaven as the origin and goal of souls; and of the correspondence between what is above and what is below. Along with this implicit astrology, Hermes also plays an explicit role as astrologer.

Clement of Alexandria mentions astrological books of Hermes, and Syncellus refers to the *Genika of Hermes*, which contained astrological doctrines.[20] A *Brontologion* on the meaning of thunder and lightning was also supposedly written by Hermes Trismegistus, as well as the *Iatromathematica of Hermes Trismegistus to the Egyptian Ammon*, a text published in Latin translation in the sixteenth century. Hermes was considered to be the founding father of iatromathematics, the branch of astrology intended for practical use in medicine. All these writings were based on the idea of sympathy between man, as microcosm, and the entire cosmos, the macrocosm, with all its stars and planets. The doctrine of the rule of the planets over men and their body parts stresses this relationship: it specifies which star gods cause which ailments, and concludes by naming the treatments indicated for curing or relieving these ailments. The iatromathematical meaning of the decans is expounded in, for instance, the *Sacred Book of Hermes to Asclepius*. Another astromedical treatise, the *Book of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius on the Plants of the Seven Stars*, assigns plants to the planets, thereby deriving their therapeutic uses. Pharaoh Nechepso and his priest, Petosiris, were allegedly the first to have drawn their astrological doctrine of plants and pharmacology from this basic Hermetic work, and the same claim was made regarding the author of the *Cyranidi*. Thus, in the name of Hermes Trismegistus, astrology was understood to be the key science for medicine. The *Organon of Hermes Trismegistus*, for example, furnishes a method by which "it can be predicted

from numbers whether a sick man will become healthy or remain ill, whether he will live or die."[21]

Besides the many texts known only by name or through doctrinal accounts, a few astrological Hermetica have been passed on to us. The *Book on the Thirty-six Decans* is a compilation that has been left to us in a fifteenth-century Latin manuscript. A supposed original might stem from the second or third century, but the text underwent so many revisions that an exact dating is difficult. Various chapters deal with the decans, the bright stars, or the fixed stars.

The book was purportedly written in its entirety by Hermes, and it seems to have been influenced by Egyptian doctrines regarding the decans. The rule of the astral spheres over earthly life is clearly articulated, as in the chapter with the lengthy title, "On the 36 Decans and the Twelve Signs of the Zodiac, Their Forms and Their Faces, Which Have the Planets in Them, That Is, in Precisely These Signs of the Zodiac." This catalogue of the thirty-six decans into which the twelve signs of the zodiac are divided follows a strict pattern: first, the form of each decan is described, its sacred name is given, and the zodiacal sign in which it lies is specified. Finally, the illness for which it is responsible is indicated, along with the geographical region over which it rules.

Fragment VI, handed down to us by Stobaeus, documents the close link between theology and astrology in Hermeticism. It includes a discussion of astrological themes in which Hermes advises Tat regarding "the zodiac, which is also called the 'circle of animals,' the sun and the moon, and the orbit of each of them," and the discussion continues with instruction on the thirty-six decans. Between the orbit of the All, which is understood as a sphere, and that of the zodiac are the decans. They balance the movements of the rapid orbit of the All and the slow movements assigned to the planets, thus maintaining the harmonic order of the cosmos as "watcher and guardian" of the All. As intermediaries between the higher and lower spheres of the cosmos, they exert a considerable influence over earthly life and are to be understood as the actual cause of both the process of history and the phenomena of nature:

> Thus derives the influence of these [decans] in everything that happens. [. . .] Overthrow of kings, revolts of cities, famines, plagues,

> receding of the sea, earthquakes; nothing of these, my son, occurs without their influence.[22]

These decans that guide earthly life, however, rule not only by means of the planets they control but also by their effect on the demons who "spread their seeds over the earth [. . .], some for a cure, some for perishing."[23] After further explanations of the various classes of stars, and the comets as well, the texts ends with a theological turn. Astrology does not function for its own sake but rather to attain knowledge of God and self: "He who knows this precisely can know God." Astrology is only a preliminary step, an earthly rehearsal for the perfect sight of God, in which man can share only after death and the separation of the soul from the body. Beholding God is the goal of astrology, less so is care for the earthly body. It is thus stressed that the decans have an effect on man and that comets serve as omens. But Tat learns nothing from Hermes regarding the use of omens or about the natal chart.

Hermes as Magus

Hermes was also revered as a magus. Among the best-known texts of this genre is the *Cyranidi* (also *Coeranidi*), so named after its presumed author, Cyranus. Its four books were apparently compiled under this title by a Byzantine editor. In the prologue it is stated that the god Hermes Trismegistus received the book from the angels and passed it along only to men worthy of its secrets. Books 2–4 originally bore the title *Hieratic Book on the Symptoms of Thrice-great Hermes*. They recommend secretions obtained from various organic and inorganic materials—four-footed animals, birds, fish, plants, or stones—as wonderful sympathetic remedies. The basis for the potential effectiveness of these medicines is the idea of a chain of being permeating the hierarchically articulated cosmos. If anything happens to one part of this chain, the effect is transmitted to an entirely different part.

Along with prescriptions and therapeutic instructions, these texts contain the traditional themes of the Hermetic writings: the soul's imprisonment in the body, its rule over the body, its release from the body, and its return to its creator.

Hermes also plays an important role in the Greek magical papyri of Graeco-Roman Egypt. These texts stem largely from the second to the fourth century, though some go back to the first century b.c.e. In them, Hermes is one of the gods called upon for the purpose of carrying out magical practices. The spells and accompanying ritual instructions are intended to assist prophecy, make love charms, harm enemies, protect against injury, and help catch thieves.

A papyrus in London contains a magical ritual that is described in extraordinary detail; its performance is supposed to bring about an oracle of Hermes. Laurel leaves, earth, wormwood seeds, wheat flour, and cynocephalic baboon grass are to be mixed with an ibis egg; out of this mixture, one is to prepare a figure of Hermes wearing a mantel at the time of a certain constellation of the moon. This figure is brought to life by writing a prayer and the oracular question in hieratic on a piece of paper or on the windpipe of a goose and inserting it into the figure. The prayer and the question are also to be written on a sheet of paper to which a strand of the practitioner's hair is affixed; a purple thread and an olive branch are to be wrapped around the paper, and it is to be set down at the feet of the figure of Hermes. Incense is to be burned and the following prayer spoken:

> World ruler (*kosmokrator*) Hermes, who are in the heart, cycle of the moon, round and square, who first taught speech to tongues, admonisher to rightousness, who wear the *chlamys* and the airy sandals, you who turn your course through the ether to the depths of the earth, guide of the soul, eye of the sun, greatest one, inventor of all expressive speech, who elates with light those in the depths of the earth and the mortals who have ended their lives. Foreknower of fate are you called and "divine dream," who send oracles day and night. You cure all pains of mortals through your healing. Draw nigh to me, o blessed one, greatest son of Mnêmê, she who carries out plans! Appear gracious in your form, approach graciously a pious man and let your gracious face appear to me, NN, that I may understand you in oracles, in your powers. I pray, lord, be gracious to me, appear to me and prophesy to me without deception![24]

In the popular piety expressed in the magical papyri, Hermes is revered not as the prophet of a philosophy of universal oneness but as a cosmic deity.

He serves as a material, earthly, corporeal, intercessory saint, as an oracle god in the service of life on earth, a god whose form can be reproduced and who can be compelled to respond through magical practices which are aimed at the welfare of the body.

That such mundane magic has to do with Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian Hermes, becomes clear in a Berlin magical papyrus from the reign of Augustus. It bears the heading, "Extract from the magical spells from the sacred book found in Heliopolis, in the *adyton* [temple library] of the temple, called the [*Book*] *of Hermes*, written in the Egyptian language and translated into Greek."[25] It contains spells for love charms and healing magic, which are accompanied by astrological allusions and solar hymns.

Hermes as Alchemist

Hermes Trismegistus and the natural philosophical ideas ascribed to him also belong to the milieu in which alchemy arose in late antiquity. Alchemy, in all likelihood, first flourished in Hellenistic Egypt in the first century. It combined a number of heterogeneous ideas such as Aristotelian and Stoic doctrines regarding the elements and matter and pantheistic and Gnostic ideas, with originally Babylonian astrology and motifs from Egyptian mythology, particularly the myth of Osiris. The oldest collections of chemical formulas are preserved in a papyrus in Leiden and Stockholm; it contains, among other things, instructions on how to replicate silver, and it uses code names to designate the materials required. It is from the third or fourth century and was presumably found in a tomb at Thebes. A basic alchemical text preserved only in fragments, the *Physika kai Mystika* of pseudo-Democritus, who professes to be a disciple of the Persian sage Ostanes, offers instructions on the imitation or preparation of precious metals from base ones. Gold or the Philosophers' Stone is to be prepared from lead: success will be achieved through a process by which the metal turns successively black, white, yellow, and red.

The first author of alchemical texts whom we can identify is Zosimus of Panopolis. He portrays both the technical and spiritual sides of alchemy, with special emphasis on the latter. And for this spiritual alchemy he cites Hermes Trismegistus as witness:

> In his *Book on Immateriality*, Hermes rejects magic [in opposition to Zoroaster] and says: "Pneumatic man, who has known himself, must neither achieve anything whatsoever with the help of magic, even if it is generally useful, nor must he defy necessity, but allow it to act according to its nature and its will. And he must not allow himself to be distracted along the way from his search for himself, to know God, and to understand the ineffable Trinity; and he must leave the filth subjected to him, that is, the body, to Destiny, to do with it what it will.[26]

In Zosimus, the figure of Hermes Trismegistus appears clearly as a teacher of spiritual wisdom. Zosimus rejects magical practices in the name of Hermes as un-Hermetic. Only knowledge of self and God can help man; only his soul is worthy of concern. He can confidently leave his body to Destiny.

In his book *On the Treatment of Magnesia*, Zosimus offers a didactic dialogue between himself and his "sister Theosebia (blessed of God)," in which he recommends two Hermetic writings as guides to individual perfection: the Hermetic *Poimander* and the *Mixing Bowl of Hermes*. The latter is the fourth tractate of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which metaphorically describes the baptism of man in a mixing bowl, filled with spirit, that has been sent to man by God. Drinking from this bowl, man knows God. Only the man who knows God as creator has the spirit and strives to return at death to the ground of his being. Man must decide between the path of spirit and the path of matter.

For Zosimus, these two Hermetic texts are aids in turning away from the material and toward the spiritual:

> In this way, taking control of yourself, you will summon the divine [to come] to you, and truly it will come, that which is everywhere, and not confined in the smallest place [. . .]. Perform these things until your soul is pefected. When you realize that you have been perfected, and have found the natural [tinctures], spit on matter and, hastening toward Poimenandres [*sic*] and receiving baptism in the mixing-bowl (κρατη′ρ), hasten up.[27]

Zosimus also describes material-practical alchemy: formulas and laboratory equipment, apparatuses and techniques for processing quicksilver; he deals with technical questions of dyeing and gives concrete instructions for laboratory practices. But the spiritual side of alchemy predominates, and, in explaining this, he claims the authority of Hermes Trismegistus. Here, too, knowledge of self, God, and nature are catchwords of Hermeticism. Hermes is less a metal-transforming technician than a spiritual teacher.

5. What Was Ancient Hermeticism?

Hermes, the Egyptian Supersage

Hermes was not just a sage. Like Odysseus, Hercules, or even Zeus himself, he was of superhuman stature. In the magical papyri he is addressed as ruler of the world and revered as omniscient. As "king of all knowledge and father and teacher of all,"[28] he himself instructed Isis and Osiris, the gods of civilization. Yet he was mortal: it is stressed that when he died, he ascended to the heavens and became the like-named planet Mercury. As the legendary inventor of many of the technologies of civilization, his achievements on behalf of men and their earthly existence were indispensable. To men, to the sphere of the finite and earthly, he conveyed that which transcends earthly, bodily, corporeal-human life and at the same time is its basis. He was a cognitive link between the transcendent God and his creation. He helped men attain a knowledge that was of necessity hidden from them, as children of nature, in their createdness. As a teacher, he was a prophet. This wise Egyptian was considered to be the creator of many theorems and technologies, and not just any whatsoever. Astrology, magic, and alchemy were included in the Hermetica, for they had a common theologicalphilosophical basis: the unity of the spiritual-divine had left its imprint on the multiplicity of earthly phenomena, with the result that all phenomena in the divine and the earthly spheres were connected to one another. Nothing that possessed dignity and being was separate and isolated, but had its ground and cause in the higher, the spiritual, the divine realm. And, conversely, the celestial was reflected in the earthly realm.

Such doctrine was not peculiar to the Hermeticists. These ideas occur in ancient Egyptian thought, and in Greek philosophy of nature, and we find

them systematically elaborated in, for instance, the Stoic concept of universal sympathy and in Neoplatonic cosmology. It is characteristic, however, that this conglomeration of doctrines appears in the guise of an ageold wisdom of Egyptian origin, handed down as a revelation by Hermes Trismegistus to a select circle of spiritually and morally superior adepts.

The texts often stress that Hermes and his wisdom were Egyptian. This point becomes especially clear from the roles played by such major Egyptian deities as Isis and Horus in some of the Hermetic writings.

Egypt's reputation as a repository of wisdom is ancient. In the frame narrative of Plato's *Timaeus*, we read that because of its great antiquity, Egypt preserves historical knowledge that has elsewhere been lost. Its outstanding governance, moreover, is the closest real approximation to Plato's ideal state, for, here, life is regulated by law according to the model of the macrocosm. In other cultures knowledge has been periodically obliterated by natural catastrophes, while the Egyptians retain access to antediluvian knowledge. It is in this context that Hermes seems to have been predestined to assume the role of guardian of ancient lore. In the ninth century Syncellus recorded a narrative that also assigned such a role to Hermes. The narrative seems to have ancient roots, however, for it is attributed to Manetho, who lived in the third century B.C.E. According to the story, the first Hermes wrote down the ancient knowledge in hieroglyphs before the Flood. After the Flood these texts were translated into Greek, collected into books by the second Hermes, and deposited in the temples of Egypt.

In classical antiquity the topos of a trip to Egypt was an especially common one. In the fifth century B.C.E., Herodotus reported that Solon and Pythagoras had been in Egypt. Returning to Greece, Pythagoras brought back certain temple rituals, the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and, with the myth of Typhon or Seth, the dualistic concept of the world. Isocrates also records that Pythagoras made a stay in Egypt and brought philosophy back to Greece. In the first book of his *Bibliotheca historiae*, Diodorus records a whole series of Greek culture heroes who traveled to Egypt to "partake of the customs and sample the teaching there," which they introduced into Greece. Orpheus "brought away from there the greatest part of his mystical rites [. . . and] his fables about the souls in Hades. [. . .] Lycurgus also, as well as Solon and Plato are reported to have inserted many of the Egyptian customs into their codes of law, while Pythagoras,

they say, learned from the Egyptians the doctrine of divine wisdom, the theorems of geometry, the theory of numbers, and in addition, the transmigration of the soul into every living being."[29]

Since the Egyptians were considered schoolmasters of the Greeks, superior in wisdom, it seemed opportune to refer to their knowledge. In *On the Mysteries*, Iamblichus demands respect for Egyptian writings, for if Pythagoras, Plato, Democritus, and Eudoxus were taught by the Egyptians, the value of Egyptian knowledge is obvious. Philosophy and theology had their origin in Egypt, and the most perfect expression of divine wisdom is to be found there, for the origin of an idea guarantees its truth, and thus, because of its primacy in antiquity and civilization, Egypt is the highestranking source of information. Iamblichus uses the model of *interpretatio graeca*, which understood foreign cultures as alternative forms of expression, to uncover an Egyptian-Hermetic core in Greek culture. If Greek philosophy is genetically linked to Egyptian theology and wisdom, it is possible to understand the conceptual world of Egypt as the latent background of Greek culture.

Admiration of Egypt at times led to scorn for that which was Greek. In the *Letter of Asclepius to King Ammon: Pillar of Memory* (CH XVI), it is stated that the Hermetic doctrines regarding God and the All can be expressed clearly and plainly only in the Egyptian language. In contrast, Greek was a "din" directed only at effect, not at substantive argumentation. For this reason, the teachings of Hermes ought never to be translated into Greek. The characterization of Hermeticism as Egyptian doctrine and the disparaging of that which was Greek seem strange, given that this text has survived to us only in Greek. Connected with this phenomenon is an attempt to protect the Hermetica against criticism: since the Hermetica, on the whole, are preserved only in Greek or Latin, in their foreign-language version just their translation, and not their content, can be criticized. Only in the Egyptian language can these doctrines be understood in pristine form.

This pretext regarding sham translation occurs often in the Hermetic writings. This is the case in the Berlin papyrus mentioned above, or when Iamblichus attempts to explain how it is that the Hermetic texts are so rich in elements of Greek philosophemes: these texts were originally written in Egyptian and subsequently rendered into Greek by translators who, because they knew their philosophy, altered the terminology.

Egypt, this “image of heaven,” this “temple of the world,” as it is called in the *Asclepius*, thus became the almost mythically overrated origin of all divine wisdom and human pious practices. And with that, the writings ascribed to the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus were considered to be age-old wisdom of divine origin.

What Is the Essence of Hermeticism?

Obviously the characterization of Hermeticism as Egyptian wisdom is not to be taken seriously. Scholars have long debated whether the essence of Hermeticism is rooted in Greek philosophy or Egyptian religion, or whether it is tied to Iranian or Gnostic doctrines. At first, opinion lay heavily on the side of the Egyptian and Iranian connection; later, however, with the scholarship of A. J. Festugière, the interpretation changed. Festugière concluded that the Hermetica articulated Greek and Hellenic ideas that originated in a Platonic intellectual milieu and that the Egyptian elements were merely decorative.

After the discovery of the Coptic manuscripts at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, stress shifted again to the genuinely Egyptian concepts in the Hermetic tractates. Connections could be made to temple inscriptions of rather late date, and even to statements in the most ancient mythological and theological texts. Today many scholars assume that the Hermetic writings should be attributed to hellenized Egyptian (temple-) priests who disseminated their theology through these texts. B. H. Stricker has articulated a position antithetical to that of Festugière. According to Stricker, the Hermetic texts are Egyptian in content, and Greek philosophy is evident only in their outward expression.

J.-P. Mahé believes that the Hermetic texts consist of a string of dicta, gathered together into literary form with the help of non-Egyptian commentaries and settings.[30]

Did the writers of the Hermetica draw directly from ancient Egyptian sources, or can we make only structural analogies along the lines of a history of ideas? To this day, the question remains undecided. All that is certain is that the Hermetic writings cannot be assigned to a single, definitive tradition of thought, a single philosophical school, or a single religious conceptual edifice.

The mention of Egyptian names and topoi is so striking that we cannot dismiss them as mere "decor," especially as parallels can be found in ancient Egyptian texts. Hermes' ornamental epithet, "thrice great," has unambiguously Egyptian precursors. From the second millennium b.c.e. on, Thoth was revered as the "twice great," which was then escalated into "thrice great," that is, "greatest of all," and finally became "Trismegistus" in the Greek language.

But it is difficult to derive the philosophical and theological content of the Hermetic texts directly from ancient Egyptian ideas. Some precursors and parallels are impressive, however, and clearly indicate that the intellectual world of Egypt could have been influential. Although the Egyptian doctrine of the decans was probably developed in competition with Babylonian astrology, nevertheless it obviously corresponds with the Hermetic writings. In Egypt the decans were symbols of regeneration. In the first millennium b.c.e. they were depicted as theriomorphic deities who protected the deceased. Just as the stars in the Hermetic texts were responsible for destiny—at least for the destiny of mortal man—so, too, were they connected to the concept of destiny in ancient Egypt. In the Ptolemaic period it was believed that they had influence over water and wind, caused diseases, and could affect various parts of the human body.

It might be the case that an interesting link between Egyptian wisdom literature and the Hermeticism of late antiquity is furnished by the Demotic *Book of Thoth*, which, unfortunately, is preserved only in fragmentary form.[31] The text contains a dialogue between "The-one-wholoves-knowledge," also called "The-one-who-wishes-to-learn," and a deity dubbed "He-who-praises-knowledge," probably a reference to Thoth. The conversation is mainly devoted to a discussion of scribal virtues and motifs of the Egyptian netherworld. Occasionally, however, it touches on themes such as the student-teacher relationship and the desire for spiritual rebirth, reminding us of the content of the Hermetic writings.

Still, the Hermetic texts must be understood above all against the intellectual background of late classical Hellenism. The search for a single source for the content of the Hermetic texts is therefore largely fruitless. On the whole, the Hermetic writings can only be understood as syncretism. They are the product of a process of intellectual fusion, as was typical of Graeco-Roman Egypt. Only detailed research can succeed in isolating Iranian, Jewish, Gnostic, Middle Platonic, or Egyptian conceptual elements.

The Polarity of Spirit and Matter

The world of the Hermetic tractates is composed of two opposite extremes, the spiritual and the material. World and man are stamped by these two poles, which stand in an unequivocal hierarchy: God and his divine spirit are good and noble, whereas matter and the physical drives attributed to it are, if not unconditionally stigmatized as evil, at least not good and noble. The more strongly a being is marked by its spiritual part, the closer it is to God, and, conversely, the more strongly it is determined by its body and drives, the more it is in danger of distancing itself from God. This means that man can choose between two paths, that of the spirit or of the body, a concept Hermeticism shares with many doctrines of the classical and late classical periods.

The body, like the world, is not evil per se. Only to the extent that the body interferes with the spirit, or that physical drives impede the spirit's cognitive faculty, are they worthy of contempt. But if the body serves the spirit, it fulfills an important function, as we learn, for instance, in the *Asclepius*. Man should tend to the earth, for the earth is a creation of God. To this end must he devote his physical strength and skills; to keep the world inhabitable, he must cultivate it and provide for the continued existence of his kind. Accordingly, sexuality has its place and its justification, for man must multiply, must strive, as a generic being, to achieve a (conditioned) immortality. The sexual act is indeed valorized as an echo of the divine act of creation, and the union of man and wife is understood as a reflection of the hermaphroditism of God.

Hermeticism is, therefore, unequivocally the opposite of Gnosis, that is, if we understand Gnosis, as is common in the scholarly literature, to be a conception of the world as altogether evil, the product of an evil creator god, and, except for scattered sparks, with no direct tie to the good, absolutely transcendent God.

Further, in the Hermetic texts the world was not created directly by God but by empowered mediators, who introduced the divine and the spiritual into matter, thus forming the world and turning the cosmos into a thing of ordered beauty, not the "vale of tears" of which Gnosis speaks.

We cannot deny, however, that Gnosis had a certain influence on Hermeticism, for the Hermeticist, like the Gnostic, longed for release from the realm of the material and the finite. He yearned for a *regressus ad*

uterum, seeking to return into God, or at least into the celestial regions from which his soul had come. The Hermetica display an ambivalent attitude toward the world: on the one hand, the cosmos is celebrated as a creation of God, but, on the other hand, everything earthly is held in contempt. The polarity of spirit and matter can be interpreted as symbiotic, or as latently conflictual. For this reason, many scholars divide the Hermetic texts into two categories: one is monistic and optimistic, the other dualistic and pessimistic.

Mystery—Cult Practice or Reading Matter?

The Hermetica describe initiations: Hermes conducts Tat to graduated knowledge of the divine; and the goal of the Hermeticist was often seen as a striving for spiritual rebirth. These Hermetic initiations stress the spiritual: of greatest importance was the experience of the soul.

Zosimus contrasted the material transformation of metals to the spiritual transformation of the alchemist: only if the alchemist accomplished a purification and ennobling within himself could he also accomplish the same in metals. The spiritual side of the alteration enjoyed primacy over the physical. In the tractate *The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead*, it is made clear that the graduated model of knowledge requires an inner path. Knowing and perceiving were events of the soul. The instruction Hermes provides to Tat could not be effected through words; rather, it had to be built on an event of the soul that took place within Tat himself, an event that Hermes, as mystagogue, could only trigger. Similarly worship and prayer were not to be viewed as external, ritual events but as an expression of inner experience. Initiation into the Hermetic mysteries was therefore not to be viewed and experienced primarily as an external, ritual event. This idea that cult practices and mysteries were meaningful if they were essentially an inner process originated with Plato, who connected his critique of the mysteries with a transformation of their language.

The object of Plato's critique was the rituals of the Eleusinian cult mysteries, to the extent that they were carried out without inner emotion and the participants believed that they could be forgiven for their sins and be elevated into the company of the gods through sacrifice and ritual alone, in the absence of remorse and repentance. The goals of the mysteries, knowledge of the divine and freedom from the fear of death, were better

achieved through philosophy. Plato, who saw man primarily as a soul with a body for a tool, thus called for spiritual, not physical, initiation and rebirth. The initiant came to knowledge of Truth not by being shown mystery plays and sacred objects, as at Eleusis, but through the discerning activity of his soul: it was dialectics, not formal, ritual practice, that led the way to the gods. In the *Symposium*, Plato provides a metaphorical description of Socrates' initiation by the mystagogue Diotima: she leads Socrates along the path of a graduated knowledge of the Good. The path begins with beholding individual beautiful bodies and leads, by way of beholding beautiful bodies in general, to the sight of Beauty itself. Only by beholding Ideas can man be divinely blessed and have a share in immortality. Thus it is through knowledge that man can be born anew and encounter death without fear. As explained again in the *Phaedo*, with the help of the language of the mysteries, Socrates attained this goal.

The theological-philosophical Hermetica also belong to this tradition of epistemological transformation of the mysteries. They deal with epistemological processes that are supposed to make the Hermeticist into a new man, and where there is talk of rituals, they are highlighted as secondary, like the magical divine name in the Nag Hammadi text. In the prayer that concludes the *Asclepius*, Hermes polemicizes against the use of incense as superfluous hocus-pocus. Hermetic ritual, as we know it from the Greek magical papyri or from the iatromathematical concepts of the astrological literature, does not conform to this pattern, for these texts are concerned with the welfare of the human body. In this regard, we see a fundamental difference of opinion between these two groups of Hermetic texts.

Ascent to Heaven was the central redemptive vision of the Hermeticist. In the fourth century Didymus of Alexandria wrote:

> That Egyptian whom they call Trismegistus said: The wise man reverses destiny. He does not stand under the sway of necessity, and he is not subject to the laws of the cosmos; rather, he is transported to Heaven. His thoughts are on high, with the heavenly phenomena.[32]

Unlike Plato's ideas regarding Heaven, which are to be understood metaphorically, the Hermetic writings are concerned, for the most part, with the substantial entry of the higher part of the soul into the supralunar

spheres. In the *Kore Kosmu*, the wish of the souls is to return to their own original place; they want to enter again into the celestial spheres. In the *Poimander*, the goal of knowledge is represented as an ascent to Heaven. The human soul is supposed to leave the body behind, to lose its lower parts in the seven planetary spheres, and to enter the eighth, where it sings the praises of God and finally merges with him. The noble part of man has its origin here, in Heaven, and only this part of him can return to Heaven. This noble, divine soul is free, for it is not, like the body or the lower parts of the soul, subject to destiny and the rule of the planets.

Festugière had divided the Hermetic texts into two groups: those that were vulgar or popular, among which he counted the alchemical, astrological, and magical texts, and the learned Hermetica, consisting of the tractates of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which deal with theological and philosophical questions. This distinction, in modified form, is still held to be valid by contemporary researchers. Garth Fowden, however, does not maintain the pejorative label for the first group, which he calls "technical Hermetica." Are there two categorically distinct forms of literature, and is their only connection their appeal to Hermes Trismegistus? That is precisely what Festugière presumed. In his view, the texts were written for entirely different classes of readers, and these readers, accordingly, put them to different uses. Current research, however, stresses the connection between the two groups. Fowden believes that they belonged to a single Hermetic curriculum, with the technical Hermetica serving as a preparatory course for the theological and philosophical texts.

A categorical division of the two groups of Hermetic writings seems, in fact, rather implausible. They are all based on the same cosmological and anthropological principles. In the (learned) texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, there are astrological passages, and in Stobaeus's collection, which is otherwise dominated by philosophical and theological themes, there is a doctrine of the decans. In the Nag Hammadi library, along with excerpts from the indubitably theological-philosophical *Asclepius*, there are Hermetica that make use of a magical divine name. To divide these texts categorically is thus impossible, but to order them into the earlier and later parts of a curriculum is, to the say the least, speculative.

Another important question is hotly debated in the scholarly literature, that of the *sitz im leben* of the Hermetic literature. Were there Hermetic communities that practiced a Hermetic cult of their own and celebrated cult

mysteries, or did the Hermetica, with their mysteries, perhaps serve merely as reading matter and not as the sacred texts of a cultic community? Those who place emphasis on the Graeco-Hellenistic side of the Hermetic texts see them primarily as reading matter. They were supposed to set in motion an inner experience of the Hermeticist, a spiritual process that, in the sense of Platonic-Socratic didactics, led to knowledge. Others, however, especially those who have concerned themselves with the Nag Hammadi texts, assume that there were Hermetic cultic communities. They cite references to communal prayer and other performative acts as indicating that there must have been ritual practices. It is also clear that the magical papyri and the astrological texts were intended for everyday use, and that they cannot be viewed only in terms of reading matter and inner fulfillment. Scholars today are inclined to consider the Hermetic texts seriously in their entire literary breadth and diversity and to consider the technical Hermetica as more than just symptoms of decline, and therefore it seems most reasonable to accord the Hermetic texts an importance in social life that went beyond mere reading matter. What is plausible for some of the texts need not be true of all of them. Nothing speaks in favor of a distinct social group that had only Hermetic texts, that knew in particular all the writings disseminated under the name of Hermes. The various texts might have had different functions in different groups.

In learned Hermeticism, many allusions to rites such as ritual embraces, immersion in a "baptismal jar," communal prayers, and so forth, can, in any case, often be understood allegorically. Yet it is striking that references to a cult are especially frequent in texts tinged with Gnosticism. Perhaps there was a cult in one of the Gnostic groups that also read Hermetic texts, whereas other groups, inspired by Platonism, used Hermetic texts as an intellectual exercise.

Obviously a unique system of Hermeticism is not to be ascertained. Instead, we have a broad literary field that displays commonalities on only a few points.

One point is that the writings mostly make themselves out to be secret knowledge communicated to a disciple by his teacher; they induct the learner into knowledge regarding the true essence of the cosmos, man, and God. God, world, and man are connected to one another; they cannot be dealt with in terms of separate theological, cosmological, or anthropological aspects.

Another point is that on the whole, Hermeticism is not a form of Gnosis, for it mostly considers the world to be a thing of ordered beauty, and not a stronghold of evil. Even where we find dualistic, pessimistic perspectives, the dualism is complementary, not antagonistic. Spirit and matter, God and world, belong together; they are different aspects of a single world.

The third point is that man is an ontotheologically distinguished being. As a union of body and soul, he possesses a special dignity. His task is to praise God and to keep the world going. His soul must therefore have primacy over his body; he must be a tool in order to fulfill his divine task. To the extent that man as body has a tendency toward evil, he is constantly endangered and must be ever aware of his divine origin and his spirituality.

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II The Middle Ages

Christian Theology and "Antediluvian" Magic

Until quite recently scholars scarcely acknowledged that Hermetic writings were remarkably well known during the Middle Ages. Although it had long been known that the *Asclepius* was translated and commented on at that time, only gradually was it admitted that other Hermetic texts were in circulation. The *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers* and a number of astrological tracts considered to be teachings of Hermes Trismegistus were almost certainly written in the Middle Ages—at least they were handed down during the Middle Ages and do not seem to have originated in classical or late classical antiquity. But because Christian writers of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages referred to the Hermetica, certainly medieval scholars were aware of them all along. In the high and late Middle Ages many texts referring to the figure of the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus were translated from Arabic into Latin. These texts and their transmission are important, but often overlooked, sources for Hermeticism in the early modern period.

Even though it is acknowledged that various Hermetic texts, and even some commentaries, existed in this period, Hermeticism has not been as important for the intellectual history of the Middle Ages as it has been with respect to late antiquity or the early modern period. Scholars have associated Hermeticism too closely with Hellenistic intellectual life, and as part of the Graeco-Roman world, Egypt and Hermeticism were deeply rooted in the cultural self-awareness of late classical antiquity. With the end of the ancient world, however, Hermeticism largely lost these roots. In the fifth century the Roman Empire, or at least the western part of it, collapsed. After Clovis converted to Christianity, the geopolitical center of gravity shifted north of the Alps. In 529 the emperor Justinian closed the Academy

of Athens, symbolically putting an end to antiquity. With the end of the ancient tradition, the survival of Hermeticism was endangered. Still it did not disappear entirely from cultural consciousness, especially because the Church Fathers held it in high esteem, and also because Arabic scholars cultivated the image of Hermes Trismegistus.

1. Christian Hermeticism

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Homer, Plato, and Cicero, along with unbaptized children and "virtuous pagans," spend their next-worldly life in the first circle of Hell, which is at least still lit by divine grace. Bad times for heathens! What role did Hermes Trismegistus, this Egyptian sage, magus, and herald of a cosmic All-God, play in the Christian conception of the world? How could Thrice-great Hermes hold his own in a spiritual milieu stamped by biblical scripture and the authority of the Church Fathers? There is no mention of Hermes in the Bible, although the books of the New Testament must have originated at the same time that Hermetic texts were being written. For the Christian world, Hermes Trismegistus was first of all an Egyptian, and in late classical antiquity, for instance, in the writings of Iamblichus, Hermeticism was considered an Egyptian religion. Unlike Hermes, Egypt played an important role in the Old Testament. We must recollect this Egypt of the Bible in order to understand the background out of which the medieval Christian image of Hermes emerged.

In the Old Testament the dominant image of Egypt is that of the book of Exodus. For Judaism, the motif of "deliverance from Egypt" is a fundamental profession of faith that repeatedly places God, as liberator and redeemer of his people, and Egypt, as negative, contrasting background, in the center of religious certainty. The memory of this redemption and liberation from oppression is firmly established in Jewish life in the festival of Passover. From this perspective, Egypt and Israel were incompatible contrasts: monotheism versus polytheism, Egyptian idolatry versus the Decalogue's prohibition of images, the truth and might of God versus the hubris of Pharaoh. The other books of Moses recall Egypt mostly as a trauma that was overcome, a reminder that God had freed his people from bondage. If the fleshpots of Egypt were missed during the Israelites' struggle for survival during the Exodus, this was a sign of the forgetfulness of simple people who remembered the good but repressed the bad. A past

that had been overcome, the antithesis of all that was important to the Jewish people and to monotheism: was this condemnation of Egypt, and therefore of Hermeticism, irrevocable? Do we not find other evidence in the Old Testament? In the story of Abraham, where we read that famine drew Israel's progenitor and his family to Egypt, this land is not just rich, an El Dorado whose inhabitants, unlike those of other lands, were not exposed to the dangers of famine, but above all it is a place of salvation for the "people of God." The same is true in the story of Joseph, where Egypt, with its wealth and security, is a refuge from famine and devastation for the Jewish people.

For Christians, it was easier to form a positive image of Egypt, for the New Testament mentions Egypt explicitly only once, and in an affirmative way. Once again Egypt is a place of refuge, this time from Herod's persecution of the Holy Family. Otherwise, there is only a single paraphrase of Exodus in the Acts of the Apostles, although it is important for the history of later tradition: Moses, we are told, was instructed in all Egyptian wisdom. This passage is significant, for it presumes a limited continuity between Egyptian and Jewish knowledge, and paves the way for the thesis that Mosaic theology was derived from Egyptian theology.[1] As the Exodus story makes clear, this connection between Jewish and Egyptian thought cannot be considered as a simple, linear continuation of a common tradition; rather, drawing on this motif were many conceptions of an esoteric, that is, a hidden and superficially invisible *philosophia perennis* underlying Judaeo-Christian and Egyptian-Hermetic wisdom.

The interpretations of the Hermetic writings in early Christian apologetics are of great importance for the history of Hermeticism. These writers, many of whom stood in the tradition of Platonic philosophy or were at least familiar with its doctrines, appealed to the image of Egypt as a land of mysteries and symbols, as sketched by Plutarch in *On Isis and Osiris*. With the help of the thesis that the culture of ancient Egypt is generally to be understood only through the distinction between surface and depth, the evident contradiction between Christianity and ancient Egyptian wisdom was resolved. Only outwardly was the culture of the Nile polytheistic and idolatrous; beneath the surface it was a proto-Christian monotheism or deism. In this way Hermeticism, as Egyptian religion, could be included in the prehistory of Christianity.

Clement of Alexandria and Lactantius

In his *Stromata* (between 208 and 212) Titus Flavius Clemens of Alexandria set about demonstrating the relationship between Christianity and classical philosophy. For a Christian, pagan philosophy was in no way a work of the Devil but instead fulfilled an important mission in *heilsgeschichte,* in that it prepared pagans for the coming of Christ. Although, for a Christian, the New Testament is the true philosophy, classical philosophy has a relative right to recognition as an early stage of it. Paul's condemnation of the "wisdom of this world" refers, according to Clement, only to the Epicurean school. Hermeticism, with its symbolic doctrine, is an appropriate Christian propaedeutic. By means of it, divine, Christian truth could be brought home to simple people in a form suitable to them. Beneath its exoteric surface was an esoteric monotheism. The superficial semantics of Egyptian culture and its religious customs must be interpreted, indeed, must be subjected to appropriate allegorical interpretation, in order to discern that God, the Christian God, was also the God of the pagans:

> To put it briefly, therefore, all barbarians and Hellenes who have theologized, have covered the ultimate source of things with obscurity and have handed down the truth using enigmas and symbols, allegories and metaphors, and by other means of this sort.[2]

The Christian Clement adopted the thesis of Plutarch, the Middle Platonist, that ancient Egyptian culture in general, and Hermetic theology in particular, could only be understood symbolically. According to this opinion, one was not to understand any cultural manifestation, any text, any divine image, according to appearances, but was to inquire after the meaning behind the appearances. The distinction between surface and depth, between exoteric and esoteric, was viewed as the decisive hermeneutic key to Hermeticism.

With his hermeneutic, Clement opened up Hermeticism for Christianity: under the surface of Egyptian culture, a relationship to Christianity could be discerned. He himself, however, did little to put this thesis into concrete terms for Hermeticism. Lactantius, who lived about a century later and made intensive use of Hermetic writings, filled this framework with

content. He praised Hermes for the extraordinary knowledge that had rightfully earned him the title "Thrice-great." This sage, whose antiquity and dignity outshone even the Greek philosophers, wrote many books about knowledge of the divine, and in them he formulated significant observations that anticipated Christianity:

> Hermes [. . .] lauds the sublimeness of the one God with endless hymns of praise, calls [him] Lord and Father and says that he is without names, for he needs no name of his own, for he is sole, and that he has no parents, for he exists of himself and through himself. The beginning of his writing to his son reads as follows: "To know God is difficult, but to describe him in words is impossible, even for the one for whom it is possible to know him; for the perfect cannot be grasped by the imperfect, the invisible by the visible."[3]

For Lactantius, Hermeticism and Christianity do not contradict each other. Rather, the central teachings of Hermes are in agreement with Christian doctrine: the transcendence and unknowability of God and his uniqueness as creator of all being are taught by both. Epistemologically, and with regard to salvation history, Hermes can be compared to a pagan prophet or to the Sibyls. Hermes had already inquired into the entirety of truth and was exceedingly learned. In his writings he revered the sole God, in reality the God of Christianity, without being able to know him as such before the birth of Christ. Lactantius explains the Hermetic dictum that the world is a second God as a prophetic statement regarding the work of Christ in the world.

There are strict limits to Lactantius's admiration of Hermes, however. From the Christian point of view, this sage was obviously only a man who was later deified. Although he understood much, he could not yet have clearly discerned the entire truth. Instead, he had "investigated nearly all the truth" and "said everything about God the Father, and much about the Son."[4] Like Clement, Lactantius understood Hermeticism, as well as Platonism, which was related to it, as an overture to Christianity. That Hermeticism included not only the transcendent creator god but also other deities was explained by the model of a preparatory stage: Hermes was on the right path out of unbelief and polytheism, but it was Christ who brought it to an end.

The ascertainment of commonalities between Hermeticism and Christianity by some of the Church Fathers would prove important to the history of the transmission of Hermetic ideas, and themes that would later characterize the discussion were contentually anticipated in Lactantius's writings: the uniqueness and sublimeness of God, his lack of names, the createdness of the world according to divine Providence, and the theological maxim that God can be understood only in his effects, not in his essence. Hermeticism agreed with Christianity even in its classification of man as created by God in his own image, in calling for piety, and in the concept that, among all creatures, the sight of God was reserved only for man.

Considering Hermeticism from this perspective, it was no longer necessary to reproach paganism. With Lactantius and Clement, a Christian could admire Hermeticism as a prelude to Christianity.

The Two Sides of Christian Hermeticism

Along with such words of appreciation, there was no lack of critical voices, and that of Augustine carried special weight for the Christian Middle Ages. In his detailed discussion of Hermetic doctrine in the *City of God*, he points to the incompatibility of Christianity and Hermeticism, treating Hermetic doctrines in connection with Platonic demonology and pagan idolatry. In the *Asclepius*, which Augustine cites in detail, Hermes taught that man could ensorcel spirits into divine images that brought him harm or favor. From a Christian perspective, he stresses, this concept is not only heathen but absurd. Augustine sees the *Asclepius* apocalypse as a direct attack on Christianity. The time of the overthrow of divine images, which Hermes depicts as a nightmare of unbelief, is the time of Christian salvation, which ended heathendom and overthrew the gods of polytheism. In depicting this time as dreadful and immoral, Hermes misjudged Christianity and revealed his own pagan nature. Since Augustine understood Hermeticism as theurgic magic and pagan idolatry, he could not valorize Hermes Trismegistus as a prophet of Christianity:

> However, in this prediction, Hermes speaks sympathetically of these demoniacal tricks without making any overt mention of the name of Christianity. Instead, he deplores the future as though he were

> witnessing the removal and destruction of rites which guaranteed to Egypt its likeness to heaven, and he speaks, as it were, like a prophet of woe.[5]

Augustine concedes that Hermes appropriately understood and represented God as creator, but his idea that men should subordinate themselves to divine images that they themselves had prepared, unmasked and discredited him: "He was as impudent in his grief as imprudent in his prophecy."[6]

For Augustine, unlike Lactantius and Clement, Hermeticism and Christianity were irreconcilable. With Christianity, truth had triumphed over heresy, faith over unbelief. Hermes and all the pagans had had no idea of the true nature of God or the salvation effected by Christianity. Hermetic doctrines were thus not a beginning of Christianity but the work of an evil demon.

Augustine nonetheless became a "defense witness" for Hermeticism, thanks to an erroneous attribution of authorship. Lactantius handed down portions of the Greek original of the *Asclepius*, which Quodvultdeus, bishop of Carthage and a correspondent of Augustine, translated into Latin in 437–439 and included in his anti-Arian tract, *Adversus quinque haereses* (Against five heresies). Here, the translator invoked Hermes Trismegistus in order to cite a leading pagan champion of the Trinity against the pagan opponents of Trinitarian dogma. Hermes thus returned to the side of Christianity as a proto-Christian advocate of a basic dogma. And into the twentieth century this very tract of Quodvultdeus was taken to be one of Augustine's works. Thus Augustine could be called upon either to condemn Hermes as a pagan or to laud him as a harbinger of Christ.

At the beginning of the fifth century a Christian could view Hermes Trismegistus and his writings from two perspectives: from the vantage point of Christian apologetics, he could understand Hermes as a prophet of Christ and his concept of God as an overture to Christianity; or, with Augustine, he could view the demonology of Hermeticism as superstition and idolatry. Augustine enjoyed an overwhelming authority in the Middle Ages, but prior to that time many voices had taken a different stand on the question of Hermetic orthodoxy. Athenagoras (second century), one of the first Christians to mention Hermes, cited his Greek epithet Trismegistus and claimed Hermes as witness to a euhermeristic explanation of the gods, according to which belief in them arose from the adoration of rulers and

sages of earlier times. Tertullian (born c. 160, died after 220) called him the "teacher of all natural philosophers";[7] although he admitted that Hermes' wisdom surpassed that of Plato, the Pythagoreans, and the Stoics, Tertullian nevertheless reproached him for ignorance regarding the origin of matter. A number of individual Hermetic *dicta* were handed down by Christian writers. Eusebius called Hermes the earliest harbinger of Christ and cited Philo of Byblos, who, with Athenagoras, was the first to mention the epithet Trismegistus. In the pseudo-Justinian *Admonitions to the Hellenes*, Hermes is counted among the prophets; according to this text, one should "allow himself to be led by the Sibyls, by Ammon and Hermes, to knowledge of the true God." Hermes was characterized as a sage, and his concept of God repeatedly attracted special attention:

> But if any of the philosophers who are called the oldest among them (the Hellenes) thinks that he has received the teaching of God, let him heed Ammon and Hermes, [. . .] Hermes, who clearly and frankly says: To know God is difficult, to describe him is impossible even for the one who has been able to know him.[8]

Despite all this agreement, it would probably be a mistake to credit Christian apologetics and the Church Fathers with any special enthusiasm for Hermes. With the exception of Lactantius, few citations and accounts of Hermetic doctrine have come down to us. It is clear that the Hermetic writings were positively valued in Christian apologetics: to defend Christianity against the challenge of Greek-Hellenistic thought, the Church Fathers established doctrines in which they incorporated the language and the intellectual apparatus of Graeco-Roman culture. The Fathers responded to the conjecture that the Christians were responsible for the fall of the culture of the ancient world by pointing to a fundamental consensus of pagan philosophy and Christian dogmatics. For them, the differences between the best pagan philosophers and Christian doctrine were not irreconcilable. In their interpretation, Christianity was not something entirely other and radically new but a religion that was in agreement with the most rational of the pagan writings. Diverse means were employed to interpret paganism and Christianity, and to bridge the gap between the two sides. In these attempts the Church Fathers remained true to their conviction that paganism did not possess the same degree of truth as Christianity.

Many doctrines of the pagans, even the wisest among them, were hidden beneath superstitious dross. The pagan writings therefore had to be understood appropriately in order to see their agreement with Christianity. Only a process of allegory made it possible to distinguish a monotheistic divine core beneath the pagan shell of the many religions.

From the standpoint of this consensus thinking and allegorical interpretation, Hermeticism could hold its ground in the Christian world, and its burden of guilt as Egyptian doctrine could be eroded. One had only to interpret the pagan evidence in this manner to clarify its connection with Christianity. The evidently age-old writings of the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus thus performed an important function, for they were understood as a primeval, proto-Christian monotheism that lay at the core of the most ancient pagan religions. Hermes was understood as a sage, often even as a prophet of Christ, and Plato and his school were seen as a part of Hermes' tradition.

2. Arab Hermeticism

In 1709, in a summary of the history of German literature, Jacob Friedrich Reimmann[9] included a treatment of "literary Hermeticism." A new physics had been invented in Germany, and this "Hermetic science" had its name and origin in Hermes Trismegistus. It had been handed down from the Egyptians to the Greeks, and from these to the Arabs, and from the Arabs to the Germans. It had been known in Germany since the fourteenth century, until it was later displaced by "scholastic and Aristotelian philosophy," and it had first been resuscitated by Paracelsus.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century a German scholar understood Arab literature as a constitutive part of a linear history of Hermeticism that led from Egypt all the way to Germany. Arab literature had, in fact, performed an important intermediary function, and Hermeticism, which later blossomed brightly in Europe in the hands of the alchemists and Paracelsists, drew largely on these writings. In its simplicity, Reimmann's concept of a linear filiation of knowledge scarcely did justice to the historical and conceptual contexts. It corresponded, however, to the self-description of the Hermetic writings of the early modern period. The Arab sages assumed a central place in the ancestral gallery of the *Ars Hermetica.*

In the Arabic accounts it was Hermes who rescued the legendary primeval wisdom. As had already been the case in (pseudo-)Manetho, the concept of the Flood played an important role. In Albuzar's (Albumazar, or Abu Ma'shar Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Balkhi, 787–886) lost book *Kitab al-Uluf,*[10] which was cited in many treatises, we learn of three legendary sages named Hermes.

The first Hermes was the grandson of Adam and lived before the Flood. The Hebrews had taken him to be Enoch, the seventh biblical forefather and the founder of civilization, whereas the Arabs took him to be Idris, a prophet said in the Qur'an to have been upright and steadfast. As the first astrologer, he was instructed by Adam regarding the hours dividing the day and night. He erected pyramids and cities in Upper Egypt, where he lived, and warned against the destruction of the world by water and fire. To save the flowering antediluvian science from perishing in the Flood, he erected the temple of Akhmim and had all his scientific knowledge carved on its walls. The second Hermes lived after the Flood in Babylon (Old Cairo); he was understood to have been the one who taught philosophy and mathematics to Pythagoras, and he had revived the knowledge. The third Hermes continued this tradition, again in Egypt. He wrote a book on alchemy and was the teacher of Asclepius.[11]

In this story Hermes appears in all the roles we already know from Graeco-Roman literature: as founder of civilization, and as scientist and theologian of legendary repute. Hermes is important here as the savior of the primeval, antediluvian knowledge that was handed down after the Flood. He was the teacher of Pythagoras and Asclepius, and thus the forefather of philosophy and medicine.

The motif of the ideal, felicitous primeval age endorsed by these Hermetic texts is classical, and we find it, for instance, in Plato's concept of Atlantis, or in Hesiod's idea of a Golden Age and an Isle of the Blessed. In the Bible this motif is closely connected with the Flood, for, according to the information in Genesis, in ancient times men were prosperous and healthy and, above all, lived for a very long time. The genealogy from Shem to Abraham reports that Shem reached the age of 602 years, and Eber the age of 464. Before the Flood men lived even longer. The genealogy

from Adam to Noah maintains that Adam died at the age of 930, and Methuselah at the age of 969.

If we follow this concept of the Hermes legends, the Hermetic writings harbored a lost primeval knowledge that had allowed antediluvian men to reach a happy old age. In the most recent past and the immediate present, this knowledge was largely inaccessible. Only by recovering the writings from the most distant past was it possible to regain the Golden Age of primeval times. Such knowledge had to be either unearthed again or revealed.

In the *Book of Crates the Sage*, a frame narrative probably from the ninth century recounts how the author came to possess his wisdom. Crates was transported into the sky, where he "wandered with the sun and the moon."[12] There he saw the "venerable old man" Hermes, clad in white, sitting on a throne with a radiant tablet in his hand. On the tablet lay a book containing the "riches of the theories of his [Hermes'] mystery, which he had hidden from the subservient [men]."[13] This story lends a special dignity to the text that follows, for it purports to be part of this hidden, divine knowledge of Hermes.

It is often in frame narratives that we are informed of the legendary knowledge of Hermes. In the *Mystery of Creation* of Balinus (pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana), we read that in Tyana there was a statue of Hermes, under which the "Mystery of Creation and the Representation of Nature" was hidden. Digging at the feet of the statue, Balinus found a vault that he could not penetrate, as strong winds constantly extinguished his lantern. Exhausted by his vain attempts, Balinus fell asleep; then, in a dream about "his *perfect nature*," he learned how to protect his flame so that he would be able to enter the vault. Once there, he beheld an old man on a golden throne who held in his hands an emerald tablet entitled "Representation of Nature," and at his feet lay a book titled "Mystery of Creation."[14]

In the *Treasure of Alexander the Great*, the frame narrative lends a special dignity to magical, alchemical, and medical texts. Caliph al-Mutatasim found a chest that Antiochus I had hidden in a monastery wall at the behest of Alexander the Great. In this chest he found a golden book in which Aristotle informed Alexander that he had been found worthy to receive the heavenly and antediluvian wisdom of King Hermes in this book.[15] This supposedly age-old Hermetic knowledge was unfolded in ten books of alchemo-medical content, with technical instructions, fundamental

principles of natural philosophy, and also information about magic and the effectiveness of talismans.

As the frame narratives stress, Hermetic knowledge was of divine origin. It had been lost but now had emerged once again into history, and it could lead mankind to a new happiness that was also the oldest.

Hermetic Magic in the Picatrix

Already in late antiquity Hermes Trismegistus had made a name for himself as a magician, and, in the Arabic writings, magical texts often claimed to be Hermetica. In the frame narrative of the *Picatrix,* we read that this ancient Egyptian-Hermetic wisdom was so powerful a magical instrument that it had to be encoded by writing it down in hieroglyphs.[16] Hermes' magical abilities are illustrated in a tale of the Copts, who were themselves reputed to be experts in science. They knew five persons named Hermes, who were responsible for many legendary cultural innovations:

> [The Copts] affirm that the first Hermes built a house at Moon Mountain, with images that made it possible to ascertain the level of the Nile. There he also built a temple to the sun; and he could hide himself from men so they could not see him, though he was among them. It was also he who built the city in the east of Egypt whose length was 12 *mil*; there he built a fortification with four gates on [all] four sides. On the eastern gate he placed the image of an eagle, on the western gate that of a bull, on the Qiblator [southern gate] that of a lion, and on the gate of the sea [northern gate] that of a dog. In them he caused *pneumata* to dwell so that they would speak when anyone approached, and he caused frightful sounds to be heard so that no one dared approach it [the city] without the permission of the [officials] in charge. He also planted in it [the city] a large tree that bore all sorts of fruit, and on the very summit of the castle, a thirty-cubit-high lighthouse with a dome that every day assumed a [different] color.[17]

Most remarkable about this city was its inaccessibility to the unauthorized. It was protected not only by live divine images but by amulets. This idea of the magical-supernatural capabilities of Hermes predominates in the Arabic texts. Seldom do they mention Hermes the theologian and philosopher.

Rather, they speak of Hermes the conjurer and magician, just like the image of Hermes in the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* or the *Asclepius*.

Hermes, Alchemy, and the Tabula Smaragdina

Along with this image of magician and conjurer was also that of Hermes as the father of alchemy. The *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadim, which dates to c. 987, enumerates thirteen books by Hermes on the subject of alchemy, about which we know scarcely anything beyond their titles: (1) *The Book of Hermes on the Art;* (2) *The Book of Flowing Gold;* (3) *The Book to Tat on the Art;* (4) *The Book of the Work of Recording;* (5) *The Book of the Secrets;* (6) *The Book al-Haritus;* (7) *The Book al-Malatis;* (8) *The Book al-Istamahas;* (9) *The Book al-Salamatis;* (10) *The Book of Armanis, Disciple of Hermes;* (11) *The Book of Niladas, Disciple of Hermes, on His Teaching;* (12) *The Book of al-Adhiqi;* and (13) *The Book of Damanus, by Hermes.*[18]

Hermes, the "Master of Wonders,"[19] was considered the protector and conveyer of the secrets of alchemy. The text *Light on the Method of Hermes of Hermesse*, which is probably from the thirteenth century, recounts another legend regarding a discovery: "Hermes" is actually a Syrian word meaning "the knowing one." Also, Idris was not his real name, for he bore it only because of his learning. Hermes' real name was Enoch, and he was an "inhabitant of the upper land of China."[20] In a cave he discovered a tablet containing "treasures of science," on which many alchemical techniques were inscribed.

The Arabic writings present Hermes as a magician and conjurer, and seldom as a god. An example of the latter is *The Great Circular Letter of the Spheres* of Hermes of Dendara, which had supposedly been hidden in a vault beneath the statue of Artemis in the temple of Dendara in the reign of a King Luqman. At the beginning of the text Hermes presents himself thus:

> I am the Master of Wonders, who built the seven spheres on top of one another, who seized the beaming sun and the shining moon and planted the tree of light-filled wisdom. He who eats of its fruit will not go hungry but can do without food and drink, he will be spiritual and divine; his knowledge will never be exhausted, and his good deeds will never cease.[21]

This aretalogy endows Hermes with the traits of a creator god, comparable to the "cosmocrator" of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae.* But such depictions remain, as stated, the exceptions, for we encounter the image of Hermes less in connection with philosophical and theological doctrines than with reference to his astrological and magical capabilities.

Few of these texts were of lasting effect and enduring significance for western Hermeticism. Aside from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, one of the most important Hermetic writings for modern Hermeticism is clearly the *Tabula Smaragdina.* Even today adherents of the esoteric hold it in esteem as a document of Hermetic wisdom. The earliest edition is attested in the eighth century, in the Arabic *Mystery of Creation* by Balinus (pseudo-Apollonius of Tyana). This text attempts a comprehensive explanation of the world. Following a chronology of the history of creation, the origin and material essence of the world are described according to the Aristotelian doctrine of the elements. The principle of the unity and coherence of the cosmos is primeval matter, which is the substrate of all natural bodies. Using the analogy between Heaven and earth, as we know it already from the Hermetica of late antiquity, what exists above always remains the cause of what is below in this ontological ordering. The course of the planets determines the three natural kingdoms of animals, plants, and stones. A description of the *Tabula Smaragdina* ends the *Mystery of Creation.* Hugo von Santalla translated it into Latin in the twelfth century.[22] The text reads as follows:

1. I speak not fictitious things, but what is true and most certain.
2. What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing.
3. And as all things were produced by the mediation of one Being, so all things were produced from this one thing by adaptation.
4. Its father is the Sun, its mother the Moon; the wind carries it in its belly, its nurse is the earth.
5. It is the cause of all perfection throughout the whole world.
6. Its power is perfect if it be changed into earth.
7. Separate the earth from the fire, the subtle from the gross, acting prudently and with judgment.
8. Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven, and then again descend to the earth, and unite together the powers of things

superior and things inferior. Thus you will obtain the glory of the whole world, and all obscurity will fly far away from you.
9. This thing is the fortitude of all fortitude, because it overcomes all subtle things and penetrates every solid thing.
10. Thus were all things created.
11. Thence proceed wonderful adaptations which are produced in this way.
12. Therefore am I called Hermes Trismegistus, possessing the three parts of the philosophy of the whole world.
13. That which I had to say concerning the operation of the Sun is completed.[23]

With its maxim "as above, so below," this text succinctly articulates the concept of correspondence, which is so important in esoteric thought. The *Tabula Smaragdina* exercised a broad influence: not only did it find numerous commentators who subscribed to alchemy, even Isaac Newton wrote a commentary on the text.

The *Tabula Smaragdina* and the *Corpus Hermeticum* are of considerable significance in the history of Hermeticism, but their audiences were quite different. Whereas the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* enjoyed great respect among the philosophers and theologians of the early modern period, it was followers of alchemy and Paracelsic natural philosophy who especially embraced the *Tabula Smaragdina.*

Although the texts of the "technical Hermeticism" and those of the "learned Hermeticism" in late antiquity cannot be considered as entirely different discourses, a distinction between the two seems to gain plausibility in the history of their later tradition. The writings of Hermes Trismegistus were disseminated along two paths, which only seldom crossed prior to the seventeenth century and, afterward, long ran separately.

Arab and Western Hermetica

In the high Middle Ages the Latin west saw itself intellectually challenged by the Islamic world. In the twelfth century many texts were translated from Arabic into Latin, thus bringing a large part of Greek philosophy back into the center of the cultural memory of the west. In the translators' school of Toledo, the two Arab philosophers Averroes and

Avicenna were translated into Latin, and this greatly influenced the development of scholastic thought.

In the early modern period western Hermeticism and alchemy were considerably shaped by the concepts and doctrines of Arabic texts. Along with the *Tabula Smaragdina,* many of these texts were translated into Latin. Thus, for example, the *Treasure of Alexander the Great* was one of the Hermetic texts of Arabic origin that was demonstrably translated into Latin. Titled *Liber de Compositione Alchemiae* (Book on the system of alchemy), it was in print in the West in 1559 at the latest, and the Paracelsist Michael Maier drew on it as a source for his description of the figure of Hermes.

The connection between Arabic and Latin Hermetica is especially clear in the story of the three sages named Hermes. Recorded for the first time by Albumazar in the ninth century, it appeared again three hundred years later in three Latin works:[24] the *Praefatio Castrensis* (Preface by [Robert of] Chester) to the *Liber de Compositione Alchemiae* of Morienus, the translator's foreword in the *Septem Tractatus Hermetis* (Seven tractates of Hermes), and the foreword to the *Liber Hermetis Mercurii Triplicis de VI rerum principiis* (Book of triple Hermes-Mercury on the 6 principles of things).

The commentary of the fourteenth-century philosopher Hortulanus was of extraordinary importance for the *Tabula Smaragdina* in alchemy. He interpreted the entire text as an allegorical statement regarding the preparation and essence of the Philosophers' Stone, a text that was handed down in a number of variations. In the early modern period this commentary was included in most editions of the *Tabula Smaragdina.*

3. *Hermes Latinus*

The Dominican Berthold von Moosburg was the successor of Meister Eckhart as Lector at the Ordensstudium in Cologne. In his commentary to Proclus's work on Platonic theology, he adduced many authorities to support his theses, as was common in the late Middle Ages. The Church Fathers were mentioned first, and then the pre-Christian philosophers who had taught a rudimentary Christianity *avant la lettre.* The most important were Plato and Aristotle, followed immediately by Hermes Trismegistus. Though this analysis was not typical for the period, it shows that Hermes enjoyed some repute among the writers of the time. We find many citations

from Hermetic texts in Berthold, which he uses to support his philosophemes and theologumena regarding God's omnipotence, the divinity of the world as a creation of God, and the doctrine of man as microcosm.[25] They stem from three Hermetic texts, but the *Asclepius* is the one most frequently cited. He also refers to two other texts that have not survived from late classical antiquity: the *Liber de VI rerum principiis* and the *Liber de XXIV Philosophorum.*

About forty such texts of medieval Hermeticism are currently known. Many are translations from Arabic, such as the *Liber de VI rerum principiis,* in whose foreword we find the above-mentioned story of the three sages named Hermes. Others, however, seem to have originated in the Latin Middle Ages. Only a few were eventually printed, most having come down through the ages in manuscript form. Some of the latter, such as the *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers,* were intensively copied.

The Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers

The *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers* was probably written in the second half of the twelfth century; most of the manuscripts stem from the thirteenth century. That there was an original form of the book in the third century in Alexandria and that it contained traces of Aristotle's lost book, *On Philosophy,* has been suspected from time to time, but these matters cannot be proven. Many important philosophers cited *dicta* from this book, such as Meister Eckhart, Bonaventura, Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusae, Giordano Bruno, and Leibniz.

The brief text consists of a short prologue and twenty-four definitions concerning the essence of God; in some manuscripts each definition is followed by a brief commentary.

The prologue reads:

> Twenty-four philosophers were gathered. Only one problem remained open to them: What is God?
>
> After a discussion, they decided to allow themselves time to think and to make an appointment to come together again. Each was then to present his thesis regarding God in the form of a definition. From the various definitions they wanted to ascertain something certain about God and come to a determination by general agreement: (1) God is

> the monad that begat a monad and turned it back on itself as a single blast of heat; (2) God is the infinite sphere whose midpoint is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere; (3) God is that which is whole in all its parts; (4) God is the spirit that begat a word and, in the process, remained entirely by itself; (5) God is that greater than which cannot be imagined; (6) God is that in comparison to which each being is only one quality and each quality is nothing; (7) God is the ground without ground, the process without change, the end without end; (8) God is the love that conceals itself all the more, the more we hold on to it; (9) God is that to which alone all is present that belongs to any time; (10) God is that whose ability is not reckoned, whose being is not enclosed, whose goodness is unbounded; (11) God is that which is beyond being, alone with itself in superabundance, self-sufficient; (12) God is that whose divinely effective might and wisdom equals his will; (13) God is the eternity that is active in itself, without division and without quality; (14) God is the opposite of nothing by means of his being; (15) God is that whose path to the form of truth and whose path to unity is goodness; (16) God is the only being that, because of its priority, words do not express and that, because of its dissimilarity, even spiritual beings do not know; (17) God is the only self-knowledge that suffers no predicate; (18) God is the sphere that has as many circumferences as points; (19) God is the eternally moving, which remains unmoved; (20) God is the only being that lives on its intellect; (21) God is the darkness in the soul that remains after all light; (22) God is that from which all that is exists, without his being divided, and through which it exists, without his being changed, and in which it exists, without his being mingled with it; (23) God is that which the spirit alone knows in ignorance; (24) God is the light that illuminates without refracting; it comes over, but in things, it is only in the form of God.[26]

The twenty-four definitions of the essence of God clearly display Neoplatonic traits. They mostly have to do with God's sublime status vis-à-vis the created world. Though the world exists through and in God, this implies, as is made especially clear in the commentaries, no confession of pantheism. Because of God's sublimeness and our finitude, man can ascertain God only *ex negativo.* Though the commentaries also attempt to

mitigate this impression, we cannot fail to recognize a tension between the traditional theistic theology that dates back to Augustine, on the one hand, and, on the other, a theology with pantheistic traits that harkens back to Hermes Trismegistus. The *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers* belongs to a mystical-Neoplatonic trend in the high and late Middle Ages, one that asserted itself alongside doctrines oriented toward Augustine and Aristotle. It was always within this context of Platonism and rudimentary deism, of mystical doctrines of knowledge and pantheistic considerations, that the Hermetic texts were handed down.

The Asclepius *in Medieval Theology*

Berthold von Moosburg was not the only writer for whom the *Asclepius* was the most important evidence for Hermeticism.[27] Augustine's verdict weighed heavily in the early and high Middle Ages, and into the thirteenth century he remained the paramount scholastic authority, determining its method and content. Had only the authentic writings of Augustine been delivered to posterity, the name of Hermes Trismegistus would surely have long remained on the periphery of cultural memory and intellectual debate. But judgment was relativized by the affirmative appraisal in the text of Quodvultdeus that was passed down under the name of Augustine, and thus Augustine could also be cited as favoring the use of Hermetic texts such as the *Asclepius.* One could appeal to Augustine either to cite the *Asclepius*, which in the Middle Ages was taken as a philosophical work of Apuleius, as a prophecy of Christianity or to brand it as magical idolatry. Various examples can be cited for both the affirmative and critical evaluation:

Peter Abelard (1079–1142) based his thesis of the natural revelation of the Trinity on an appeal to the *Asclepius.* Even the pagans had an understanding of Christian doctrines. The Greek philosophers, in particular, had known a synonym for the Holy Spirit in the concept of the "world soul." Abelard's doctrine of the Trinity and its Christological implications were condemned, however, at the Council of Sens in 1140. Similarly the bishop of Hereford, Robert von Melun (c. 1100–1167), demonstrated by means of citations from the *Asclepius* that the pagans had knowledge of the Trinity. Thus Hermeticism could be interpreted as related to Christianity, and Hermes could be considered a prophet in the sense of the Church Fathers. The alleged Trinitarian doctrine of Hermes Trismegistus, this

representative of the most ancient Egyptian piety, showed how the essential features of Christianity were accessible to the pagans.

Criticism of the *Asclepius* was mostly based on Augustine's *City of God.* In his youth the bishop of Paris, Guillaume d'Auvergne (1180–1249), had esteemed the *Asclepius* as a path to knowledge. But Augustine's writings finally taught him a better way to gain knowledge, and, as a result, he recognized the doctrines of the *Asclepius* as heathen idolatry.

Whereas Thomas Aquinas barely knew Hermetic texts and was familiar with the *Asclepius* only from Augustine's writings, Albertus Magnus (c. 1200–1280) drew on them directly and held Hermes in high regard. Albertus referred to Hermes Trismegistus, and to the *Asclepius* in particular, for its doctrine of destiny and for the concept of man as a link between God and the world. He was especially fascinated by the definition of man as a spiritual being capable of rising to a knowledge of the divine, and at the same time as a corporal being with a responsibility to care for the things of this world:

> The consideration of divine things is not explained by our reason, in so far as it is human, but in that it is something divine in us. As Hermes Trismegistus aptly says in the book he wrote about the God of gods for his friend Asclepius, man is the link between God and the world.[28]

The Dominican Albertus surely was inclined toward Hermeticism because of his knowledge of Neoplatonic philosophy. Here, as already in late antiquity, as well as in the Arabic texts and in the *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers*, Hermeticism and the use to which it was put were closely connected to Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrines.

Nicholas of Cusa and Hermeticism as Accusation of Pantheism

As early as his first sermon in 1428, Nicholas of Cusa cited the *Asclepius.* This transcender of medieval philosophy and predecessor of modern thought referred to Hermes to demonstrate that the philosophers of classical antiquity had knowledge of God as *logos* or *verbum.* Nicholas believed that Hermes had grasped nearly all the truth, an opinion that was not original but was taken over from the Church Fathers, especially

Lactantius, whom Nicholas cites as having handed down the *Asclepius.* In his principal philosophical work, *De docta ignorantia* (On learned ignorance, 1440), however, Nicholas cited directly from the Latin *Asclepius.* This mention of Hermes Trismegistus and his doctrine was not just a philological *marginalium* but was something of an explosive subject, as demonstrated by Nicholas's controversy with Johannes Wenck, professor of theology at Heidelberg.

In his *De ignota litteratura* (On unknown learning, 1442–43), Wenck attacked Cusa's *De docta ignorantia*, to which Cusa reacted with an apologia in 1449. The former argued as an Aristotelian, defending Aristotle's *tertium non datur* (law of the excluded middle) against Cusa's idea of *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites), that is, the abolishing of all opposites in the oneness of God. He reproached Cusa's doctrine of coincidence for abolishing the distinction between God and the world, thereby preaching pantheism. Following Cusa's concept of God, God would be indistinguishable from the things of the world:

> First thesis: All things coincide with God. This is evident because He is the Absolute Maximum, which cannot be comparatively greater and lesser. Therefore, nothing is opposed to Him. Consequently, God —on account of an absence of division—is the totality of things, as Hermes Trismegistus says. Hence, too, no name can properly befit Him, because of the absence of a distinct bestowal.[29]

Cusa thus repeats Eckhart's ontotheological doctrine *esse est Deus* (being is God) and thus entangles himself in anti-Trinitarian consequences: as the infinite, in whom all opposites and all finite things dissolve, God cannot be conceived of in a Trinitarian manner, for, as the infinite and nameless, he admits of no internal differentiation.

In his apologia Cusa responded to this reproach by referring to the distinction between idea and image, and to that between *ratio* (which operates with the Aristotelian *tertium non datur* and refers to the finite) and *intellectus* (which is able to conceive of the *coincidentia oppositorum* and touch on the infinite, and thus is superior to *ratio*). God cannot be known by means of *ratio*, but only his creation; and *intellectus* alone can reach up to the infinity of God and understand him as the infinite in which all opposites coincide. With his accusation Wenck showed that he considered God as an

object. Never had he written, Cusa stressed, that God and the world coincide. God is the Being of all, without being any thing; rather, he is the *forma formarum* (form of forms). All Being is folded into God, but the Being of the world is unfolded, and thus the decisive distinction between *complicatio* in God and *explicatio* in the world.

Cusa had to defend himself against the accusation of pantheism, which was dangerous in Church politics. We note such constraints especially in his interpretation of the writings of Eckhart. With the help of the esoteric hermeneutics that he prescribed for Eckhart and on behalf of which he cited Hermeticism, he could express appreciation for Meister Eckhart without openly attacking the condemnation of his theses by John XXII in the year 1329.

Besides the many references in his work to the *Asclepius,* Cusa also cited the fourteenth definition from the *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers*: "God is the opposite of nothing by means of his being." He aligned himself with a tradition of thought which he believed he discerned in the writings of Hermes Trismegistus: negative theology and the concept that all Being (or all predicates of Being) is contained by implication in God, a concept that also includes the idea of the namelessness of God.

4. Traditions of Medieval Hermeticism

We can comprehend Hermeticism in the western Middle Ages only by understanding the Christian character of this period. Many of the Church Fathers had considerable respect for Hermetic doctrines, and in their efforts to communicate Christianity to the Graeco-Roman world, they expressed admiration for Hermeticism. They considered it, on the one hand, to be the origin of pagan Greek philosophy; on the other, the widespread notion that all Egyptian and Hermetic material had to be interpreted symbolically gave them many opportunities to draw comparisons between Christianity and Hermeticism. In the most ancient of times, though in rudimentary form, Hermes had taught many of the central dogmas of Christianity. Various writers assumed that beneath the surface of polytheistic cults lay the essence of a monotheistic, proto-Christian theology. Augustine's harsh criticism of the *Asclepius* as magical, idolatrous heresy was not a death sentence for medieval Hermeticism, for, as already noted, Quodvultdeus's

positive evaluation of the text was erroneously handed down under the name of Augustine.

Hermes remained important in the Arab world, especially in the magical literature. He was considered to be the sage who, prior to the Flood, had protected the age-old knowledge of the divine from loss, and who, after the Flood, had brought that knowledge back to life. Only by discovering the antediluvian literature containing this wisdom could humankind revive, in the name of Hermes, the felicitous era before the Flood. In the history of Hermetic tradition, the *Tabula Smaragdina* was the most important text for alchemists and Paracelsists.

Some of these Arabic texts were translated into Latin beginning in the twelfth century, and they contributed substantially to an increased interest in Hermeticism in the west. Besides the *Asclepius*, which had been the only Hermetic text passed down from late antiquity, and the translations from Arabic, Hermetica were also composed during the high and late Middle Ages, some of them provoking widespread interest. Appeals to Hermetic texts can be found in the writings of the principal representatives of German mysticism, such as Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, Heinrich Seuse, and Dietrich von Freiberg. Tauler believed that the great, noble pagans had known the Trinity, if only *in nuce*, and he cited definitions 21 and 24 from the *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers.* The first two *dicta* from this text were cited by Alain de Lille (Alanus ab Insulis or Alain von Rijsel), who also knew the *Asclepius.*

Notwithstanding this apparent interest in Hermeticism, we cannot speak of a broad stream of Hermetic literature. Even the influence of the Hermetic texts still remains unclear. Since Hermetic concepts were adopted in connection with Middle and especially Neoplatonic texts, it is extremely difficult, perhaps even meaningless, to attempt to determine whether Hermetic writings had a decisive influence on German mysticism or on Cusa's doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum.*

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1. Acts of the Apostles 7, 22: "So Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds" (New Revised Standard Version).

2. The translation here follows that of Franz Overbeck, *Clemens Alexandrinus, Teppiche* (Basel, 1936), p. 436 (*Stromata*, bk. 6, chap. 4).

3. Cited after Andreas Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos als Zeuge der Wahrheit* (Berlin and Vienna, 2001), p. 138. (Epitome 4, 4–5.)

4. Ibid., p. 122. (*Divinae Institutiones* IV, 27, 18–20.)

5. St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, S. J., et al. (Garden City, N.Y., 1958), p. 167.

6. Ibid., p. 168.

7. Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos*, 15, 1; see Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*, pp. 47–52.

8. This and the previous quotation are from Georg Heinrich, *Der Hermes-Mystik und das Neue Testament*, ed. Ernst von Dobscheits (Leipzig, 1918), p. 150.

9. Jacob Friedrich Reimmann, *Versuch einer Einleitung in die Historiam literariam derer Teutschen* (Halle, 1709), vol. 3/1, p. 431.

10. Manfred Ullmann, *Die Natur-und Geheimwissenschaften in Islam,* Handbuch der Orientalistik, supplementary volume 6/2 (Leiden 1972), p. 373.

11. Ibid., pp. 732–733.

12. Julius Ruska, *Arabische Alchemisten*, vol. 1 (Heidelberg, 1924), p. 17.

13. Ibid., p. 18.

14. Ursula Weisser, *Das "Buch über das Geheimnis der Schöpfung" von Pseudo-Apollonius von Tyana* (Berlin and New York, 1980), pp. 74–75.

15. Julius Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der hermetischen Literatur* (Heidelberg, 1926), pp. 68–107.

16. Hellmut Ritter, "Picatrix, ein arabisches Handbuch hellenistischer Magie," *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg* 1 (1921–22): 107.

17. Cited after Hellmut Ritter and Martin Plessner, "*Picatrix*" *: Das Ziel des Weisen von Pseudo-Magriti*, translated into German from the Arabic, Studies of the Warburg Institute 27 (1962), pp. 322–323. The Latin text of the passage is published by D. Pingree, *Picatrix: The Latin Version of the* Ghayat Al-Hakim (London, 1986), pp. 188–189.

18. The translation follows that of Ruska, *Tabula Smaragdina,* p. 65. See also B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadim: A Tenth-century Survey of Muslim Culture*, 2 vols. (New York, 1970), 2:848.

19. Ullmann, *Natur-und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 167.

20. A. Siggle, "Das Licht über das Verfahren des Hermes der Hermesse dem, der es begehrt," *Der Islam* 24 (1937): 287–306.

21. Cited after Ullmann, *Natur-und Geheimwissenschaften*, p. 166f.

22. Joachim Telle, “Tabula Smaragdina,” in Burghart Wachinger, ed., *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*, vol. 9 (Berlin, 1995).

23. H. Stanley Redgrove, *Alchemy, Ancient and Modern*, 2d ed. (London: William Rider, 1922), pp. 40–41.

24. See Charles S. F. Burnett, “The Legend of the Three Hermes and Abu Ma’shar’s Kitab Al-Uluf in the Latin Middle-Ages,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 39 (1976): 231–234.

25. Antonella Sannino, “Berthold of Moosburg’s Hermetic Sources,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 63 (2001): 243–258.

26. Translation from the Latin: Kurt Flasch, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 113 (May 17, 1997): 31. François Hudry, *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio mediaevalis, no. 143a (Turnhout, 1997), in the series *Hermes Latinus*, vol. 3/1, ed. Paolo Lucentini.

27. On the medieval tradition of the *Asclepius* and the importance of Quodvultdeus, see Carlos Gilly, “Die Überlieferung des *Asclepius* im Mittelalter,” in Roelof van den Broek and Cis van Heertum, *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition* (Amsterdam, 2000), pp. 355–367.

28. Cited after ibid., pp. 349–350.

29. Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’ s Debate with John Wenck: A Translation and an Appraisal of* De ignota litteratura *and* Apologia doctae ignorantiae (Minneapolis, 1981), pp. 25–26. Wenck intends thus to summarize the position of *De docta ignorantia I,* 24. The Latin text is cited in Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’ s Debate with John Wenck,* p. 102.

III Renaissance

Primeval Wisdom for a New World

1. Tradition or Rediscovery?

A widely believed legend is that Hermeticism, having vanished in the Dark Ages along with the ancient world, remained hidden under the mantle of Christian dogmatism until it was rediscovered in the Renaissance. In 1439 the cover was lifted when Cosimo de Medici relocated the great Council from Ferrara to Florence. The Greek scholars in attendance, including Bessarion and Plethon, so impressed the Florentine intellectuals, especially Cosimo, with their knowledge of Greek antiquity, that they decided to create a home in Florence for the ancient spirit, particularly Platonism. Some years later the head of the Medici family chose Marsilio Ficino to render Plato's writings from Greek into Latin. Then, in 1460 or thereabouts, one of Cosimo's agents sent the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* to Florence. So while Ficino was still in the process of translating Plato, Cosimo unexpectedly asked him to render the texts of Hermes Trismegistus. Ficino completed the first translation in 1463, a year before Cosimo's death, and with that began the renaissance of Hermeticism, which shaped the intellectual history of the early modern period into the seventeenth century.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, contrary to what has long been affirmed, Hermeticism endured in the Middle Ages. The West did not have to be awakened from a dogmatic slumber in this regard. Moreover, the history of the rediscovery suggests that there was, at first, only the Hermeticism of the Italian humanists, which spread from Florence throughout all of Europe. This is misleading, however, for Italian

Renaissance Platonism and northern European alchemo-Paracelsism drew on difference sources. Accordingly, they developed rather different conceptual and cultural profiles and divergent images of Hermes Trismegistus. With a few striking exceptions, it was only in the seventeenth century that these two images were united in the critical treatment of the Hermetic writings.

The Italian Renaissance philosophers Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola belonged to a tradition that was influenced by the Church Fathers and their interpretation of Hermeticism, and they concerned themselves with the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*. The situation was otherwise with the alchemo-Paracelsists, who, from the sixteenth century on, were grouped in northern Europe under the name of Hermes. Few of them were familiar with the *Corpus Hermeticum*. For the most part, they referenced the *Tabula Smaragdina* and other Hermetica with alchemical content, of which the learned men of the Renaissance were largely ignorant. In the seventeenth century Michael Maier and Athanasius Kircher used both Hermetic traditions, but they, along with a few others, were exceptions.

Ficino: Hermes as Founder of Philosophy

The re-emergence of Hermeticism, in so far as it concerned Italian Renaissance Hermeticism, is largely correct. The *Corpus Hermeticum* was made available to the early modern period via the humanism of the Renaissance. After the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* arrived in Florence in 1460, and were translated into Latin by Ficino in 1463 and then printed in 1471 under the title *Pimander,* there began a fruitful tradition of Hermes Trismegistus and his theological-philosophical writings.

Ficino's literary productivity was made possible by the patronage of the Medici. The son of a prosperous physician, he studied philosophy and medicine and soon thereafter received the support of Cosimo de Medici who, in 1462, presented him with a house in Carregi, near Florence. In the years that followed, Ficino was an active translator; along with the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the writings of Plato, he rendered the texts of many other Greek writers into Latin: Plotinus, Iamblichus, Porphyry, Proclus, pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, and other texts, especially those in the Platonic tradition. His life was devoted to communicating and commenting on

Platonic philosophy. Under Ficino's patronage, humanists gathered in his house to discuss Plato's work, forming a circle that came to be called the Platonic Academy. Such important scholars as Angelo Poliziano, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Lorenzo and Giuliano de Medici joined him in devoting themselves to the interpretion and fostering of Platonic works. For them, this fascination with classical and late classical philosophy in no way contradicted Christian faith. Indeed, Ficino was ordained as a priest in 1487, received ecclesiastical prebends, and from 1487 was a canon in the cathedral of Florence. He remained a highly regarded scholar until his death in 1499.

The fifteenth-century mosaic from the floor of the cathedral of Siena, attributed to Giovanni di Stefano, depicts Hermes in connection with the

nine Sibyls, and thus as a prophetic harbinger of Christ. © 1990, photo Opera della Metropolitana di Siena, authorization no. XXX.

Ficino's foreword to his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was highly influential in the history of the interpretation of the Hermetic texts. Referring to Neoplatonic and Christian writers of late classical antiquity, Ficino sketched a genealogy with far-reaching consequences for the history of ideas:

> At the time of Moses' birth, there lived Atlas, the astrologer, who was the brother of the physicist Prometheus and, on the mother's side, the grandfather of the elder Mercury, whose grandson was Mercury Trismegistus. Augustine wrote this concerning him, while Cicero and Lactantius were of the opinion that this Mercury was the fifth, and that it was the fifth Mercury who was called Theut by the Egyptians and Trismegistus by the Greeks. He supposedly killed Argus, ruled over the Egyptians, and gave them laws and letters. But he made the form of the characters in the shapes of plants and living beings. This Mercury enjoyed such admiration from his fellow men that he was elevated into the ranks of the gods. And a great number of temples were erected in his honor. Out of respect, his real name was not to be pronounced in daily life or without reason. Among the Egyptians, the first month of the year was named after him, [and] a city was founded by him that is now called Hermopolis in Greek, that is, City of Mercury. But he is called Trismegistus, that is, thrice great, because he was the greatest philosopher, the greatest priest, and the greatest king. For there is among the Egyptians, as Plato writes, the custom of choosing the priests from among the philosophers, and the king from the community of priests. That one thus outshone all the philosophers in astuteness and erudition, and he was thus made a priest. But as a priest, he was superior to all the priesthood in the holiness of his life and in adoration of the gods, with the result that finally, he received the royal dignity, and as king, he placed the fame of the earlier kings in the shadows through his lawful rule and military deeds, so that he was rightly called thrice great. As the first philosopher, he turned from natural and mathematical things to contemplation of the divine. He was the first to discuss, with great wisdom, the majesty of God,

> the ordering of the spirits, and the changes of the soul. He was called the first author of theology. He was followed by Orpheus, who gained second rank among the ancient theologians. Aglaophemus was initiated into the Orphic mysteries, Pythagoras followed him in theology, and the latter was followed by Philolaus, who was the teacher of our divine Plato. There thus arose a single, internally consistent, primal theology (*prisca theologia*), from six theologians in wonderful order, which had its beginning in Mercury and its fulfillment in Plato. Mercury wrote a great number of books about knowledge of the divine, in which (by immortal God!) secret mysteries and astonishing oracles were revealed. He often spoke not just as a philosopher, but as a prophet. He foresaw the fall of the ancient religions, the coming of Christ, the Judgment to come, the Resurrection, the glory of the blessed, and the punishment of the sinners. Augustine thus wonders whether he brought forth much from his knowledge of the stars or through the revelation of demons. But Lactantius does not hesitate to count him among the Sibyls and prophets.[1]

Ficino draws his image of Hermes from the accounts of classical and late classical antiquity. He first cites Augustine, beginning his foreword with Augustine's historical classification of Hermes. Thus Moses and, with him, biblical revelation, is older than Hermes Trismegistus and the philosophical-theological tradition. If Atlas flourished when Moses was born, he must have been at least one and a half generations older than Moses. But since Atlas was supposed to be the grandfather of the elder Hermes on his mother's side, the elder Hermes was at least slightly younger than Moses, and his grandson, Hermes Trismegistus, was obviously much younger than Moses. Ficino leaves this chronological order without commentary, contrasting it only with the representation of Lactantius and Cicero, whom he cites in what follows. From them he borrows the image of Hermes as a legendary founder of culture, who ruled Egypt and taught the Egyptians how to write and how a god was to be worshiped.

He bore his "epitheton ornans" because he had distinguished himself as a king, a priest, and a philosopher. As the first philosopher, he turned from earthly to heavenly and divine themes. Ficino thus dealt with three themes:

the transcendence of God, the hierarchy of the cosmos (the demons), and the transformations of the soul.

If Ficino revered Hermes as the father of all theology, he obviously did not refer to Augustine, Hermes' critic, but to Lactantius. Hermes was the founder of a theo-philosophical tradition to which the greatest of the Greek philosophers adhered: Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato were in agreement with Hermes Trismegistus on the essentials. And, to Ficino, this agreement seemed more important than the question of the exact order of the ancient theologians. Though Hermes was the first, this did not lead the Renaissance philosopher to set him above Plato, who was chronologically the latest. If Plato completed this tradition, he was not thereby just a pale reflection of a truth that shone more brightly in more remote antiquity but rather the most incisive articulation of that truth.

In his discussion, Ficino appeals to the classical and late classical topos of Egypt as the origin of wisdom and to Hermes Trismegistus as the incarnation of this wisdom. He proves himself to be a good humanist by taking up these motifs from ancient thought and using the texts he translated to win respect for them in the fifteenth century.

His interpretation of the *Asclepius* apocalypse is entirely different from that of Augustine. Hermes had shown himself to be a prophet of Christianity; he foresaw the fall of the ancient religions, the rise of a new religion, the coming of Christ, and, indeed, the Last Judgment, with the sinners punished and the righteous rewarded, thus pointing unequivocally to Christianity. The humanist thus voted in favor of Lactantius and against Augustine.

Ficino thought he had established so many correspondences between the Mosaic texts and Hermeticism that the question could arise of whether Hermes and Moses might not be identical.

Though Ficino changed the order and the names of the representatives of the *secta philosophorum* in his commentary to the *Philebus* in 1469, with the result that Hermes was obliged to cede his priority to Zoroaster, the concept of a tradition of divine knowledge that manifested itself even among pagans remained important to him. The Holy Spirit, always remaining the basis of revelation, revealed itself, over time, in various forms, and to the most varied representatives of the ancient theologians. To understand the Holy Spirit, common elements had to be sought in the diverse testimonies. Plato and Hermes spoke essentially about the very

teachings that Moses received from God and which are expressed in the New Testament. The cosmology of the *Pimander* and that of Genesis, although differing in their outer form, agreed in their actual messages. According to Ficino's interpretation, Hermetic-Platonic paganism and Christianity were in agreement on the basics of divine revelation. Hermes, Plato, and Pythagoras had each received a divine revelation of his own. Hermes was among those who preceded and paved the way, but he was not the only authentic source of divine knowledge. When Ficino writes that Plato was initiated into the sacred mysteries by Hermes Trismegistus, this does not mean that Hermes communicated his knowledge directly and concretely to Plato. Rather, Hermes served Plato as a psychopomp, or guide, for only God could reveal the truth to Plato.

Ficino's image of Hermes was not really new. Nevertheless, out of the many sources at his disposal, he constructed an image of the sage Hermes Trismegistus that best suited the conceptual world of humanism and of the Italian Renaissance. This image of Hermes marked the Hermeticism of the early modern period, when Ficino's translation was warmly welcomed, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* received many further translations in various editions.[2]

Based on Ficino's Latin translation, Tommaso Benci rendered the texts into Italian; like Ficino's work, this translation first circulated in manuscript form. In France the *Corpus Hermeticum* soon spread through the efforts of the humanist Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples (Faber Stapulensis, 1450–1536), who also wrote brief commentaries on the individual chapters. The Greek text appeared for the first time in 1554 in an edition by Adrien Turnèbe. Foix de Dandale (Francescus Flussas Candella) published a bilingual Greek and Latin edition in Bordeaux in 1574, and it was reprinted in Cologne in 1600. The translation by Francesco Patrizi proved to be especially influential; first appearing in 1591 as an addendum to his magnum opus, *Nova de Universalis Philosophia* (New philosophy concerning the universals),[3] it was later published separately many times. Translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were first printed in Holland and England in the seventeenth century, but not until the eighteenth century in Germany.

Pico's Universalism

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, of the lineage of the Count of Mirandola and Concordia, is generally viewed, along with Ficino, as an important representative of Renaissance philosophy. Born in 1463, Pico was renowned as a *wunderkind* because of his early and numerous intellectual gifts and linguistic capabilities. Concerning himself first with Aristotelianism, he familiarized himself with Arab and Hebrew thought. In Florence he became acquainted with Ficino, who encouraged him to study the works of Plato. In 1486, at the age of twenty-three, Pico published nine hundred theses in Rome and wished to invite scholars from all over Europe to discuss them. Pope Innocent VIII forbade the disputation, however, and later banned all nine hundred theses. Faced with charges of heresy, Pico fled to France, where he was taken into custody, but he was freed at the recommendation of a number of influential patrons, and he came under the protection of Lorenzo de Medici. In Florence, in 1489, he wrote the *Heptaplus* (Seven days of creation), an allegorical commentary on the biblical account of creation, and, in 1491, *De ente et uno* (On Being and the One). In his later years Pico was influenced by Savanarola (1452–1498), the preacher of repentance. He died in 1494 at the age of thirty-one, leaving behind an astonishingly large body of work for such a brief life span.

Pico's nine hundred "philosophical, cabalistic, and theological conclusions" argued that there was fundamental agreement among the various traditions of intellectual history, which included the Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Bible and its theological interpretation in the works of Thomas Aquinas, and the esoteric traditions of the Cabala, Hermeticism, and Arab philosophy. In a letter to Ermolao Barbaro dated June 1485, Pico stated this hermeneutic concisely: "The Arabs and the Egyptians said the same thing, not in Latin, but they said it rightly."[4] His argument was thus similar to Ficino's: that beneath the culturally and linguistically divergent accounts, there lay a common conceptual core, namely, a single spirit that remained the same.

Among Pico's nine hundred theses, ten referred to Hermes Trismegistus:

1. Wherever there is life, there is soul. Wherever there is soul, there is mind.
2. Everything moved is corporeal, everything moving incorporeal.
3. The soul is in the body, the mind is in the soul, the Word is in the mind, and the Father of these is God.

4. God exists around all and through all things. The mind exists around the soul, the soul around the air, the air around matter.
5. Nothing in the world is devoid of life.
6. Nothing in the universe can suffer death or destruction. Corollary: Life is everywhere, providence is everywhere, immortality is everywhere.
7. God announces the future to man in six ways: through dreams, portents, birds, intestines, spirit, and the Sibyl.
8. What is true is not perturbed, not determined, not colored, not fashioned, not agitated, but is naked, transparent, comprehensible through itself, intransmutably good, and fully incorporeal.
9. Within each thing there exist ten punishers: ignorance, sorrow, inconstancy, greed, injustice, lustfulness, envy, fraud, anger, malice.
10. A profound contemplator will see that the ten punishers, of which the preceding conclusion spoke according to Mercury, correspond to the evil order of ten in the Cabala and its leaders, of whom I have proposed nothing in my Cabalistic conclusions, because it is secret.[5]

These theses refer in large part to Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum.* Theses 1 to 7 are excerpts from Tractate XII, and theses 8 and 9 are from Tractate XIII of Ficino's *Pimander; or, On the Might and Wisdom of God.*

To introduce the discussion of the theses, Pico had written an oration that was never presented because of the papal ban. It exists in two versions, but only one, titled *On the Dignity of Man,* is well known. Pico bases man's dignity on his freedom. He is the only creature that is not determined; rather, he has received from God the freedom to determine himself. He can descend to the lowest animalistic being, but he can also elevate himself to divinity. He was created by God to admire God's work. Pico appeals to Plato and Aristotle, to the Bible (of course), to Zoroaster and Pythagoras, to the Delphic or Chaldaean Oracles, and to the Cabala. Hermes Trismegistus, however, is cited at a central point. At the very beginning of the oration, Pico cites the Hermetic dictum, "A great wonder, Asclepius, is man." Many ideas in his oration remind us of concepts familiar from the *Corpus Hermeticum:* the possibility for man to move through all the regions of the cosmos, the concept that man was created to admire God's creation, and the description of omni-vision as the object of mystical vision.

It would be a disservice to Pico, however, to trace specific ideas in his speech exclusively to concepts in the *Corpus Hermeticum.* After all, his nine hundred theses were supposed to show that a common kernel of truth underlay all the important cultures in the history of humankind, so that it would be erroneous, therefore, to discriminate among them with regard to dignity and truth.

Renaissance Hermeticism and Prisca Theologia

Pico and Ficino are often invoked in the same breath as "Renaissance Hermetists." Ficino, in fact, saw his task as the dissemination of texts that belonged to a tradition of ancient philosophers that Hermes Trismegistus either started or at least was one of its earliest exponents. Ficino could see that his doctrine of the soul, which was based on Neoplatonism, was confirmed by these very texts: the soul, as the crucial element that gave form to the world, was the intermediary between matter and the spirit, which stemmed from the One. But besides Hermes, Ficino appealed to many other authorities whose writings embraced concepts related to those of Hermeticism.[6]

While Ficino evinced interest, even fascination, with Hermeticism, the same was scarcely true of Pico. It is even doubtful that Pico read much of the Hermetic texts, and in his works we find no real appreciation of Hermes Trismegistus. Pico considers Thomas Aquinas in forty-five of his theses, but no one would call Pico a Renaissance scholastic. In a late text directed against astrology, he distances himself from Hermes Trismegistus, refusing to credit Egypt as the cradle of civilization, for the Egyptians were, for the most part, ignorant and untutored.

Hermeticism was well suited, however, to hermeneutic maxims aimed at an allegorical reading of ancient philosophical and theological works, be they Homer or the Bible. In Hermeticism, in particular, one could see a trenchant articulation of a semiosis of symbolism or concealment. In this sense, as the product of a technique of disguise, Hermeticism could be understood as an Egyptian form of theology and philosophy.

In his commentary to Benivieni's *Canzona d' amore* (Song of love), Pico writes,

> It was the opinion of the ancient theologians that divine subjects and the secret Mysteries must not be rashly divulged [. . .]. That is why the Egyptians had sculptures of sphinxes in all their temples, to indicate that divine knowledge, if committed to writing at all, must be covered with enigmatic veils and poetic dissimulation.[7]

These explanations are not an innovation of Renaissance scholars. They are adapted from Iamblichus's interpretation of Hermeticism, or they adopted an interpretation of Egypt from Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris,* especially the concept of the "veiled image of Sais": that the truth was revealed only behind a veil, and that this veil never should or could be removed from the truth.

Frances A. Yates, who has rendered great service to research in Hermeticism, surely exaggerated when she claimed that Florentine Renaissance philosophy had a fundamentally Hermetic core.[8] According to Yates, the cosmos was conceived in the Renaissance as a tissue of magical powers in which man could creatively intervene, and this concept was derived from an analysis of the Hermetic texts. This conclusion might suit the Hermeticism of Giordano Bruno, but it can scarcely bear generalization.

The number of important Renaissance scholars concerned with the writings of Hermes Trismegistus is impressive, however. Aside from Ficino and Pico, there were, for instance, Giordano Bruno, Francesco Patrizi, and Robert Fludd. In his book, *Nova de Universalis Philosophia* (New philosophy concerning the universals), which appeared in 1591, Patrizi constructed a genealogy of knowledge that began, as was also the case in Ficino's later writings, with Zoroaster, who is taken to be the author of the *Chaldaean Oracles*.[9] Zoroaster founded colonies in Egypt, and he found a descendent in King Osiris, who had an adviser named Hermes Trismegistus. The latter's grandson was also called Hermes Trismegistus. After Zoroaster, this Hermes, who lived before Moses, was the second most important philosopher. Since wisdom had survived among the Egyptian priests, Orpheus and Pythagoras were initiated into it while they were in Egypt. Even Plato stood in this tradition of wisdom, which was interrupted, however, by Aristotle. It was Ammonius Sakkas (175–242), the founder of the Neoplatonic school, who once again breathed life into this ancient wisdom of Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus. Because of its Aristotelian stamp, the Middle Ages broke away from this tradition, until Ramón Llull

(Raimundus Lullus, 1235–1315/16) and Paracelsus (1493/94–1541) renewed it yet again. Thus the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, and not those of Aristotle, were to be the basis of a Christian education:

> It is thus much better, more advisable, for Christian men, and far more useful, for the doctrines of Hermes, rather than those of Aristotle, which are overall teeming with great godlessness, to be taught [. . .] in the public schools and in the cloisters.[10]

Patrizi was fascinated by the agreement of Hermeticism with Christian belief and Platonic doctrines. Like Lactantius before him, he saw in Hermes an especially early harbinger of the Trinity. To illustrate his own philosophical doctrines, he drew on the philosophical and pantheistic doctrines of the *Corpus Hermeticum.* Patrizi passes over all the magical implications, explaining that Hermetic texts devoted to magic were false.

Besides pointing to the traditional accord between Hermeticism and Platonism, other attempts were made to take Hermeticism into account. Annibale Rosselli (1525–1592), in his detailed commentary on the *Asclepius* and the *Pymander,* extensively adopted Ficino's image of Hermes; in order to connect the Hermetic and Catholic traditions, he discussed the Hermetic texts in the style of the scholastic method of "quaestiones."[11]

Many other scholars pursued this theme, and the literature has much to offer that is worth remarking on. But overall the result would scarcely be different. Hermeticism suited the times, and it suited the structures of a thinking that was chiefly Platonic and Neoplatonic; it was mostly concerned with the concept of soul and spirit and saw in Hermes a first-rate exponent of a religiously articulated form of this thinking. To that end, Hermeticism served as an interface between Christianity and Platonism. Hermes had been one of the first to teach the Trinity, and he prepared the way for Plato.

We find many traces of Hermes Trismegistus in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples (Faber Stapulensis), Calvin's teacher and the man who paved the way for the Reformation in France, admired the Hermetic texts, and Giovanni Da Correggio even thought of himself as the reincarnation of Hermes Trismegistus, styling himself "Giovanni Mercurio."

2. Hermeticism and Paracelsism

One side of early modern Hermeticism can be seen in Italian Renaissance Platonism, Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* and Pico's citation of the *Asclepius* in his "Oration on the Dignity of Man." The other side is to be found north of the Alps, mainly in Germany. As Reimmann already knew at the beginning of the eighteenth century, this Hermeticism is not to be understood as the heir of Ficino's translation and commentary of the *Corpus Hermeticum* but rather as a synonym for alchemy, which was candidly called the *Ars Hermetica,* the Hermetic Art. Notwithstanding some connections, neither the discourse of the *Ars Hermetica* nor its origin and theological and natural philosophical legitimation can be understood as deriving directly from Renaissance humanism.[12] Obviously different texts stood at the respective centers of concern regarding Hermes Trismegistus. Although the Renaissance philosophers referred largely to the *Corpus Hermeticum,* in alchemo-Paracelism the *Tabula Smaragdina* was regarded as the most important reference for Hermes Trismegistus.

As eponymous patron of the *Ars Hermetica,* Hermes played an important role in the legends that legitimated it. Christoph Balduff's "Kurtzer/deutlicher und warer Unterricht/von der geheimten und verborgenen Kunst Chymia" (Brief, clear, and true instruction concerning the mysterious and obscure art of Chymia), from the year 1609, cites the historically proven achievements of alchemy against the "evidence that alchemy is of no use." Among the philosophers he wrote about, Hermes stood in first place:

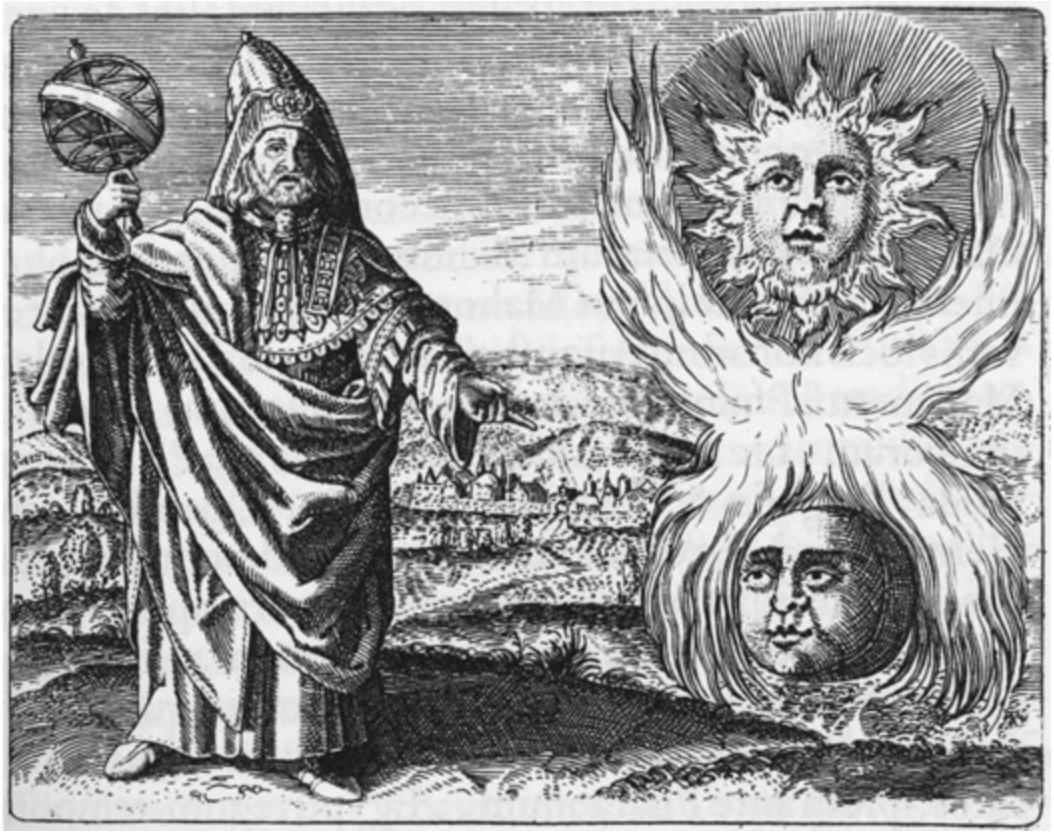
> Hermes [. . .] was a wise man in Egypt, as several write, before King Pharaonis, and he should be called Termaximus, because, already in those days, he spoke of the Holy Trinity. Others give this reason, that he was a brilliant philosopher, priest, and king in Egypt at the time when Moses was born, and that he wrote many strange, wonderful, mysterious, and obscure things about the divine, though Augustine was skeptical as to whether he got that from spirits or stars. Lactantius counted him among the Sibyls and prophets. But what he wrote about Chymica, I know nothing more than a little tract of seven chapters, and another called *Tabula Smaragdina of Hermes,* which he wrote with his own hand, and which is supposed to have been found in his

> grave by a woman named Zarach. And all the art of Chymia is included therein but in obscure language. Another philosopher named Hortulanus made a brief but entirely clear commentary and explanation of it. And, in the books of the Chymists, this Hermes is often cited as the most distinguished and oldest Chymist, from whom all the others drew their art.[13]

Balduff's image of Hermes possesses much in common with that of Italian Renaissance philosophy in that Hermes is seen as an ancient, wise Egyptian who anticipated the Christian dogma of the Trinity and thus was admired by Lactantius. Augustine is mentioned not to brand Hermes as a pagan but to stress his astonishing knowledge regarding the divine. But the thesis that Hermes wrote prior to Moses, and thus was more ancient than the biblical-Mosaic tradition, is seldom found in Renaissance philosophy. Clear, however, are the differences from Ficino's image of Hermes. Here, Hermes is claimed as the prime exponent of alchemy. Balduff was indifferent to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius,* but he saw the importance of Hermes' alchemical writings such as the *Tabula Smaragdina* and the *Tractatus Septem de Lapide Philosophico* (seven tractates on the Philosophers' Stone). Balduff places Hermes Trismegistus at the beginning of a tradition to which Plato, Plotinus, and Ficino did not belong, a tradition that included Zosimus, the first alchemist, and the Persian magus and alchemist Ostanes, and was completed by Theophrastus von Hohenheim, also known as Paracelsus.

Paracelsus (1493/94–1541), the physician, natural philosopher, and alchemist, was declared, by Balduff, to have been the legitimate heir of the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many adherents of Paracelsus also viewed Hermes Trismegistus as the leading authority of their science. That Hermes became the idol of a natural philosophy of medicine already had a basis in the ancient sources. Homer, Isocrates, and Herodotus had already sung the praises of the Egyptians' medical capabilities, and Clement mentioned the medical books of Hermes Trismegistus, whose writings were also important in astral medicine. For alchemo-Paracelsism, moreover, Hermes possessed an asset that qualified him as its forefather: bearing the seal of his authority was a tradition of philosophemes that otherwise were suspected of heresy. Doctrines of antiquity and late antiquity could be understood by referring to

the Church Fathers, and Neoplatonic-pantheistic doctrines especially, under the guise of Hermeticism, could be seen as another side of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a pagan prelude to Christianity.



Hermes as father of alchemy and predecessor of the Paracelsists and Rosicrucians. Here he points to images symbolizing a sentence from the *Tabula Smaragdina*: "Its father is the Sun, its mother the Moon." From Michael Meier, *Symbola aurae mensae duocedim nationum* (Frankfurt, 1617), p. 5.

Hermes and the Dignity of Alchemy

In his foreword, titled "On the Dignity and Use of Alchemy," to the collaborative volume *Promptuarium Alchemiae* (Repository of alchemy), Joachim Tancke (1557–1609) interpreted alchemy as part of biblical *heilsgeschichte* (salvation history).[14] Thus the art of preparing effective medicines and refining substances was seen to be of divine origin, "a special present and gift of God Almighty."[15] In the Bible the mention of

Tubalcain as the "first bronze and ironsmith" and the enumeration of gifts for the Tabernacle were signs of the importance of alchemy in *heilsgeschichte.* Because gold could not in fact be reduced to powder by burning, Tancke assumed, based on the story of the Golden Calf, that Moses had learned this means of dealing with metals in Egypt:

> It is to be presumed that Moses was brought up by Pharaoh's daughter in all the teachings and goodly arts of the Egyptians, and that the mystery of Nature was not unknown to him, as can be, to some extent, demonstrated.[16]

Moses an alchemist? We learn nothing further from Tancke, except that there is probably evidence, even in the Old Testament, of secret, magical knowledge—after all, even the three Wise Men from the East were undoubtedly to be understood as magi. Natural philosophy, and thus the history of alchemy and magic, were not, however, the subject matter of the Bible. The history of natural philosophy is clearly to be discerned in secular history. The forefather of this science was Hermes Trismegistus:

> The earliest philosopher, who first described this art, was Hermes Trismegistus, an Egyptian born of royal blood. He expressed and wrote the entire art briefly in an emerald, so that it is still today called the *Tabula Smaragdina of Hermes.*[17]

Like Balduff, Tancke makes no appeal to the *Corpus Hermeticum.* He highlights the *Tabula Smaragdina* and the alchemical texts regarding the Philosophers' Stone as the most important evidence of Hermes Trismegistus. In the sense of a mythoalchemy that viewed the classical myths as symbolic encodings of the alchemical process and its history, he interpreted the narrative of the "golden fleece" as a report on the spread of alchemical knowledge through various cultures. Though Tancke wished to discern the history of alchemy in Greek mythology, he did not think that Hermetic knowledge passed directly and unadulterated from the Egyptians to the Greeks. Greek wisdom, natural philosophy in particular, was basically of Egyptian origin:

> Because the philosophers in Greece understood that the Egyptian priests were excellent natural historians and learned persons who

> alone understood the mystery of nature, [. . .] they went to Egypt, and from the priests and philosophers, called magi among the Persians, they learned the true philosophy that was not found among any Greeks. Thus Democritus of Abdera, a man of high intellect, was prompted to go to Egypt to learn the mystery of nature and the true philosophy. When he therefore opened the tomb of the Egyptian priest Dardanus and returned to Greece with the books wherein the golden philosophy and hidden mystery of nature were described, he studied them and finally himself wrote and left behind books on alchemy.[18]

The concept that Greek culture was in many respects an heir to Egyptian-Hermetic wisdom was a traditional topos in classical antiquity. Tancke, however, was concerned with a specific cultural technology that he traced back to the Egyptians and Hermes Trismegistus: alchemy. Democritus, who is mentioned here as the supposed author of alchemical texts and not because of his authentic writings on natural philosophy, obtained this knowledge from Egypt. But only some Greeks were legitimate heirs of the Egyptians and their Hermetic knowledge. Aristotelianism, for instance, had little in common with the "true philosophy" of Egyptian-Hermetic provenance:

> And theirs, the Greek philosophers' [philosophy] (so that we now drag ourselves along, and think we have gulped it all down and swallowed nature when we have peeked into Aristotle, for it falls as short for us and so far away from the mystery of nature as the sky is far from the earth) is but incomplete work and considered imperfect for man to be able to satisfy his mind therewith.[19]

In Aristotelian philosophy Tancke saw a symptom of decline. It was imperfect work and did not match the wisdom of those he understood to be the guardians of the Egyptian-Hermetic tradition. Hermeticism was seen to be superior to Aristotelian philosophy, as the former did not simply understand nature in terms of its surface, which is perceptible to the senses, but could discern the cause of, and reason behind, the processes of nature. All the philosophers who were initiated into Hermetic wisdom in Egypt distinguished themselves through a Hermetic epistemology that penetrated

the surface so as to perceive the essence of effects, the idea behind appearances:

> Hermes, Democritus, Pythagoras, and Plato were such excellent philosophers that, with heavenly or angelic eyes, they saw that Nature implanted and poured into all things a hidden and spiritual, mighty power, so that when these very things were ransomed and redeemed from the earthly corporality and impediment in which they developed and were imprisoned, it was a wonderful effect.[20]

Tancke referred to Hermes Trismegistus to legitimate his own natural philosophy. This (neo-)Platonic, decidedly anti-Aristotelian doctrine of knowledge was traced back to Hermes and had, as its object, the processes or objects that lay behind superficial appearances, that is to say, "depth ontology." Because he identified this form of philosophy as Hermeticism, Tancke was able to use ancient topoi regarding Egypt as the treasury of wisdom. In his historical construction, he regarded the entire Platonic tradition as essentially related to alchemy. At the starting point of the Platonic and the alchemical traditions stood Hermes, who created the epistemic and natural philosophical principles of both.

With the usefulness and dignity of alchemy historically proven, Tancke invited his fellow men to read painstakingly the important texts of the *Ars Hermetica.* Their knowledge regarding nature and its forces and effects should be no less studied in the universities than the doctrines of Aristotle and Galen. Joachim Tancke, a professor at Leipzig University, wanted to promote alchemy as an object of learned study in the universities. He was rather exceptional in this regard, for alchemo-Paracelsism was seldom at home in the academies and universities, neither socially nor intellectually.

Conversion to Hermeticism

Such appeals to Hermetic tradition occur in many Hermetica of the early modern period. Hermeticism seems to have become a label with which a text and its factual content could invite recognition of its orthodoxy and its truth. This phenomenon is clear in the legitimation legends of alchemo-Paracelsism.

In the appendix of the 1603 edition of the works of Theophrastus von Hohenheim, called Paracelsus, there appeared the *APOCALYPSIS HERMETIS AB ILLUSTRISSIMO VIRO, AUREOLO Helvetico, qui fuit Hermes Secundus* (Apocalypse of Hermes, by the most illustrious man, the Swiss Aureolus, who was the second Hermes), or, as it was titled in the 1608 edition, *Apocalypsis Des Hocherleuchten Aegyptischen Königs und Philosophi, Hermetis Trismegisti; von unsern Teutschen Hermete, dem Edlen, Hochthewren Monarchen und Philosopho Trismegisto, A[ureolo] Ph[ilippo] Theophrasto Paracelso [. . .] Verdolmetschet* (Apocalypse of the most enlightened Egyptian king and philosopher, Hermes Trismegistus; translated by our German Hermes, the noble, most beloved monarch and thrice-great philosopher A[ureolus] Ph[ilippus] Theophrastus Paracelsus). The information in the title presents several puzzles, insofar as it is supposed to deal with a revelation of the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, which was translated by Paracelsus, celebrated as the "second Hermes" or the "German Hermes" in the title. In fact, this text was not originally published under either the name Hermes or Paracelsus. The *Apocalypsis spiritus secreti* (Apocalypse of the secret spirit) was first published in London in 1566 by the Venetian Giovanni Battista Agnello, who provided commentaries. It consists of various citations from texts with mostly alchemical content. Cited are Arnoldo de Vilanova, John de Rupescissa, Raimundus Lullus, and Aristotle, along with some dicta of Hermes Trismegistus; but Paracelsus is not mentioned! And yet, only a few years after its initial publication, Paracelsus became the supposed author of this text. Already in 1570, in the pseudo-Paracelsic *Tinctura Physicorum* (Tincture of the philosophers), the first-person narrator, Paracelsus, affirms that he had written an *Apocalypsis Hermetis* (Apocalypse of Hermes). All editions of the text, after 1570, were linked to Paracelsus; sometimes his authorship was affirmed or, at the very least, he was credited with an important role in the origin of this revelation of Hermes.

It remains unclear how this attribution of the text came about. In the foreword to the 1608 edition, however, the publisher, Benedictus Figulus, clarifies the importance of Paracelsus and Hermes among the Paracelsists of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by means of a narrative history of the development of Hermetic knowledge.[21] This history is embedded in an autobiographical account of the author's conversion.

According to the account, Benedictus Figulus was first instructed in "common Aristotelian philosophy," and then, through reading the works of Theophrastus von Hohenheim, Roger Bacon, and Isaac Hollandus, he had an experience of philosophical awakening. As a result, he saw through Aristotelianism, regarding it as "empty, dead nattering far removed from the basis of truth";[22] it was incongruent with the accounts of the ancient sages, an inspiration of the Devil. The "better philosophy" of alchemo-Paracelsism so impressed him that he resolved "not to lay my head down peacefully until I acquired such a Universal Stone, together with the Precious Heavenly Medicine."[23] He thus declared himself a "disciple of Paracelsus" and took to traveling about to learn the Paracelsic-Hermetic science. This science taught the "[Cog]Nosce teipsum [Know thyself] and the basis of the Light of Nature" and was in agreement with many of the "pagan philosophers," especially Pythagoras. It was a matter of "this Hermetic philosophy of ours [. . . ,] which includes true astronomy, alchemy, and magic, and also Cabala."[24]

Figulus relates the history of the development of the true, divine knowledge. Adam's universal knowledge was endangered by the Flood, but it managed to survive in Egypt, in the Hermetic science. There, Moses was initiated into this wisdom, and, in this respect, Hermetic knowledge was substantially the same as Judeo-biblical and Egypto-Hermetic knowledge. The "idolatrous and superstitious Greeks" broke away from this knowledge, for "their own arrogance and presumption foiled and bewitched them and plunged them into error."[25] The resulting mixture of falsehood, unbelief, Devil's work, and conceited rationalism was passed along by the Greeks to Roman philosophy, which spread through all of Europe, determining the content of what was taught in most academies and universities. Using Aristotelian philosophy, Satan had "pulled the wool over the eyes" of all Christendom. Figulus, however, recalls salvation, and, in what follows, he elucidates the principal doctrines of Hermeticism, which "based True Natural Philosophy on the Light of Nature."[26] Only this philosophy was in a position to guide Christendom to its original theology and philosophy.

Figulus's harsh polemic becomes understandable if we recall that the Paracelsists were a socially marginal group. It was they, and not those with traditional book learning, who often had to suffer repression. Figulus's invectives should be understood to reflect his own life. He did not undertake his travels only out of philosophical considerations and as a path

to Truth. As a Lutheran priest, he was a victim of the Counterreformation. Biographically his expulsion from Lipprichhausen in Franconia seems to hang closely together with his ultimate declaration of support for Paracelsus and Hermetic philosophy. With this genealogy of knowledge, the socially marginalized Figulus defended his own case. He felt he did not belong to the diabolically blind majority of the traditionally schooled but saw himself as a warrior on behalf of true Christian knowledge. The history of Hermetic knowledge was, for him, a means of giving historic legitimacy to the distinction between true and false, between knowledge derived from revelation and knowledge derived from reason. Against the background of a legend of legitimacy based on a genealogy of knowledge, it was Paracelsus, the "second Hermes," who had brought about a renascence of Hermeticism. With that, so Figulus thought, the world could be saved from diabolical blindness and darkness, and the social dominance of Aristotelianism would be broken. Orthodox believers would thus find—along with the Bible—their second foundation in the Hermetic writings, which agreed in their substance with Holy Scripture.

Chymiſches Luſtgärtlein/
Mit ſchönen in Kupffer geſchnittenen Figuren gezie-
ret/auch mit Poetiſchen Gemälden illuſtrirt
vnd erleutert.
Alſo daß es nicht allein Augen vnd Gemüt er-
quicket/ ſondern zugleich eine ſehr tieffe betrachtung der natür-
lichen dinge erwecket/ſo in dieſer ablengs Form zu einem
Stammbuch guter Freund ſehr dienlich vnd be-
quem kan gebraucht werden.
Beſchrieben von M. Daniele Stolrzio de Stolzenberg/
Boh. der Medicin Candidato.
Nunmehr aber auß dem Lateiniſchen transferirt vnd in
gewönliche teutſche Rhythmos bracht/
Durch Danielem Meißnern von Commenthaiv/B.P.L.C.
Franckfurt/In Verlegung Lucæ Iennis 1624.
HERM
PARAC

Hermes and Paracelsus, the two leading authorities of alchemy in the early modern period, graced the title pages of many alchemo-Paracelsist books. Stoltzius von Stoltzenberg, *Chymischen Lustgärtlein* (Frankfurt, 1624), title page.

The *Aurora Philosophorum* (Dawn of the philosophers) was anonymously published in Latin in 1577, printed at least four times in the sixteenth century. In 1605, it was included in an edition of the works of Paracelsus. In its opening chapters the semiosis of Hermetic writings is legitimized by citing the history of the development of Hermetic knowledge. Once again, we see topoi that we know from so many Hermetica. The primeval knowledge was written down by Adam's sons on two tablets of stone, "on which all the natural arts were engraved and recorded in mysterious, obscure characters that they called hieroglyphs."[27] After the Flood, a large part of this knowledge managed to survive in Egypt, but it was also passed along by Moses to "the children of Israel." Hermes was the wisest of the Egyptians, and also the incarnation of the primeval Adamic knowledge.

Important for this history is less the "what" of Hermetic knowledge than the "how." In order for divine wisdom to spread, it is necessary, according to the author of the *Aurora Philosophorum,* to understand the symbolic representation by means of which that wisdom was handed down in Egypt. Egyptian wisdom, which was expressed in symbols and enigmas, was adopted in this form by a number of Greeks:

> Among the Egyptians, it was the custom to express such excellent doctrines of wisdom not simply and clearly but in a figurative and enigmatic manner, using obscure words and inserting strange stories that the superb poet Homer later described with wonderful art in his verses. There was also Pythagoras, who included a great deal from the Law of Moses and the Old Testament.[28]

Many Greeks, including Homer, Hippocrates, Thales of Miletus, Anaxagoras, Democritus, "and others who were proficient in it" stood in the tradition of an Egyptian-Hermetic wisdom. But not all these Greek philosophers could be included in the tradition of true divine wisdom, for they were "not of the same opinion among themselves" and "did not concur with the correct, true philosophy and wisdom of the Egyptians." They did not penetrate to the true depth of this wisdom but only remained at the surface. Pythagoras was aware of this and "did not want to be called a sage

because the priestly shrine of the wisdom of the Egyptians was not perfectly familiar to him, though he was well instructed in all its matters." It was otherwise with the Chaldaeans, the Persians, and the Egyptians, who possessed the same doctrines, though they expressed them differently according to their language and semiotics: "The Chaldaeans, Persians, and Egyptians had the same knowledge of the mystery of nature, and the same religion and worship, differing only in changing the names." The distinction between these various religions and cultures consisted only in a difference at the sigmatic surface, that is, it was a matter of differing designations. In their basic views of divine truth, the doctrines of these peoples were identical. The criterion for deciding which writings and which wisdoms belonged to the Hermetic-Adamic tradition, therefore, lay in an appropriate allegoresis, that is, an allegorical reading, that made it possible to break through the exterior and penetrate into the essence of the writings.

More significant than the familiar history of the primeval Hermetic-Egyptian wisdom is the form and epistemology of that tradition, which distinguishes between the superficial and the profound, and recognizes that hidden beneath mere names and appearances is essential truth.

Plato, too, by distinguishing between Ideas and appearances, systematized the ancient concept that a common, enduring principle underlay various superficial manifestations. Thus all Western thinkers to whom a symbolic doctrine was attributed, or who could be understood as adherents of a Platonic philosophy, could be integrated into the Egyptian-Hermetic-Adamic tradition. Aristotelian philosophy, by rejecting the Platonic doctrine of Ideas and maintaining the dictum that the essence of things lies only within themselves, did not conform to Hermetic, symbolic semiosis, and, accordingly, was little appreciated in the legends intended to legitimize Hermeticism.

What Is Hermetic Philosophy?

How was the difference between the superficial and the profound, between appearance and essence, expressed in the Hermetic natural philosophy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? The *Liber Apokalypsis Hermetis* (Book of the apocalypse of Hermes) is concerned with the essence and effectiveness of a panacea that endows man with long life. It specifies the properties of the *Quinta Essentia* (fifth essence,

quintessence), which itself is not an element and is thus imperishable. This wonder drug, which is qualified as spirit, unites all the properties of the elements and links the spiritual to the material world. As nature's principle of life, it is designated "World Soul," in the sense of Neoplatonic ontology. With its help, all worldly goods can be gained. In its form as universal curative, the World Soul reveals itself in five different hypostases. In its earthly, watery, airy, and fiery embodiments, it heals all illnesses. Only in its fifth embodiment, however, does it attain full effectiveness, so that it can exert influence over the stars. Thus it acts on all manifestations of transitoriness, indicates hidden treasures, and can assist in producing gold and precious stones. The spirit's various embodiments are designated by different names, but this should not disguise the fact that it is but a single spirit that is manifested in different effects without losing its unity. Notwithstanding its ubiquitous character, its essence is unknowable and unnamable. The text closes with a hymnic address to the spirit, a declaration of the truthfulness of its exposition, and an appeal not to communicate the mystery revealed in the *Apokalypsis Hermetis* to anyone not worthy of it.

From the viewpoint of the history of philosophy, the text connects two concepts that are somewhat difficult to reconcile. The Aristotelian doctrine of *Quinta Essentia* is combined with the Platonic concept of the World Soul, without there being even a rudimentary problematizing of this relationship. The philosophical terminology stems from the doctrine of microcosm and macrocosm and, in this respect, is already seen in the philosophical Hermetica of late antiquity, where it is not linked with Aristotelian thought. Nature is understood not as the material existence of the world but instead as the inner regularity of things. The material world has its order, its ontological status, through spirit. This concept of spirit is identified with the concept of the World Soul:

> This spirit is [. . .] called the Soul of the World, for just as the soul moves all the limbs of the body, so this spirit moves bodies, and just as the soul is in all the limbs of the body, so this spirit is in all elemental creatures.[29]

This World Soul is what penetrates and orders everything, and thus is the element that gives form to the World Body, which itself is formless. The

World Soul can hypostasize itself in nature in various forms without losing its unity and identity. Thus no event in the world is isolated; rather, in so far as the World Soul is involved, it is connected with the whole. Nature cannot be understood by only a fleeting glance at its external appearance; instead, we must observe the processes of nature in order to discover the laws of coming into existence, passing out of existence, and change. To make gold or to create a universal cure, it is necessary to understand how changes in metals or bodies occur in nature. This is obviously not a matter of an empirical model, for it is the "behind" that must be uncovered, "that which the world embraces within itself," in other words, the mystery of nature.

With regard to formal history, this text can be classified as belonging to the tradition of alchemical theory. It is an adaptation of the first two books of the *Liber de consideratione quintae essentiae omnium rerum* (Book on the contemplation of the *Quinta Essentia* of all things) by the Franciscan John de Rupescissa. The *Liber Apokalypsis* differs from the *Liber de Consideratione* in that the former offers an unequivocally Neoplatonic interpretation of the panacea. The text also displays traces of Arab sources. Thus the names of the medicines that correspond to the specific hypostases of the World Soul are often formed with an *al-,* the definite article in Arabic. Further, the authority cited most often is Avicenna, one of the most important exponents of Arab Neoplatonism, a clear indication that this Hermetic text has Arab roots.

3. Religious Hermeticism

Hermetic texts are often distinguished by an especially close connection between religiosity and natural philosophy. Only the faithful who were ethically and morally qualified could behold God and the essence of the world, and only they would be initiated into the mysteries of the divine. Knowledge of nature as creation also meant knowledge of God as creator. Natural philosophy actually made it possible to have knowledge of God and to lead a life that was pleasing to God. Knowledge of God, a life pleasing to God, and knowledge of nature are often interwoven. This point is as obvious in the texts from late antiquity as in the Hermetica of the Middle Ages, and even Ficino concerned himself with Hermeticism because he saw in it an ideal inner congruence with biblical tradition: Hermetic philosophy seemed to him to complement Christian theology.

In the sixteenth century the question of true religion assumed an ever growing importance. What role did Hermeticism play in the face of confessional tensions and the increasing polarization in questions of faith? With the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555, there was a certain balance. In the codification of the confessions and still more with the Peace of Westphalia and the establishment of the confessional map of Germany, it became clear that, because of the political influence gained by the major confessions, those forms of religiosity that had not been institutionalized were increasingly falling by the wayside. Only because of the necessity of choosing sides during the confessional splits, only at a time when political and sometimes also financial success depended on confession, did heresy become a social and political problem. Most "witch burnings" occurred not during the late Middle Ages but in the early modern period.[30]

Sebastian Franck's Spiritual Hermeticism

Sebastian Franck (1499–1543) was a remarkable exponent of Hermeticism. The Bible, to him, was an "eternal allegory" not to be interpreted according to the literal meaning that pointed to historical facts. With its contradictions and confusion, the "outer word" of the historical narratives of the Bible demonstrated its own absurdity. In the Protestant understanding of scripture, in its maxim *sola Scriptura,* Franck thus saw a "paper pope." For him, "inner word" alone was the basis of faith and the unobjectifiable and thus undogmatic foundation of human affairs. This scepticism led Franck to a radical eclecticism, for the isolated datum, the isolated text or theory, were never, by themselves, capable of truth but were simply mundane events not to be taken seriously. The world was only a "Shrovetide play of God."[31] Theological statements were, for Franck, meaningful only in the sense of a "negative theology." He did not wish to approach divine truth dogmatically but rather by way of the negations and paradoxes that were an essential means of argumentation and style in his compilatory writings, and in which Hermeticism played an important role. In his *Golden Ark* we read, regarding Hermes Trismegistus:

> This enlightened philosopher, king, and priest, wonder of the Egyptians, flourished in the time of Abraham; he was called Teut by the Egyptians, and by the Greeks Trismegistus, *ter maximus,* that is,

> three times all-greatest [. . .] because he was beyond all measure an enlightened philosopher, an excellent priest, and a noble, apparently serene king.[32]

Franck derived his image of Hermes, as he acknowledges, largely from Ficino, though he clearly assigns a distinctly earlier date to Hermes: he was a contemporary of Abraham and thus clearly antedated Moses. Franck's interpretation of Hermeticism was far more radical, however, in that he considered the Hermetic writings to be a pagan replacement for Christianity and for Judeo-Christian revelation. The *Pimander* contained "all that is necessary for a Christian to know." This text was in no way a primitive, early stage of a truth that finally reached its explicit perfection in the Bible. This Hermetic theology was "as masterfully written as by Moses or any prophet" and thus must be put on a level with theirs. Franck goes even further and sees in Hermes a clearer herald of God than Moses was. Moses, as part of his mission, "was not to speak out half as lucidly, in order to give the people, who were accustomed to thinking figuratively, everything covered in figures, so that this mystery would be revealed only through Christ."[33] Hermes, however, had been able to express himself more clearly.

Certainly Franck was no Hermetist, for as little as he believed in the "outer word" of the Bible, just as little could he validate Hermeticism as doctrine in the dogmatic sense. Rather, Hermes was for the Egyptians what other sages had been for other peoples. He assumed that every people had had its prophets. As Moses had taught the Hebrews the essence of God, so Plato had taught the Greeks, and Hermes Trismegistus the Egyptians: "Thus this Egyptian Moses instructed and enlightened the Egyptians in Egypt, just as Plato, the Greek Moses, enlightened the Greeks, and Moses the Hebrews."[34]

What is true of scripture is even more true of God. The image of God formed by a culture, the theorem regarding God that a theology establishes, or a philosopher's definition of God are only derived forms of the Holy Spirit. God does not belong to a specific culture or doctrine. Franck stresses the unity and identity of the sole God, who is not only the God of Christians but a God for all those who prove their worth through practice:

> [. . .] that the impartial God (who does not favor any person but only those who do right among all peoples and fear God so that he benefits

them) is also the god of the heathens and has always been he who has enlightened, informed, inmirrored the Heathens with his light, word, grace and Christianity.[35]

This universal God, a God of both reason and righteous action, was not worshiped only by the Egyptians and Hermes Trismegistus. Nor was he the God who had been a deity only to confessed Christians or to the Jewish people. Rather, the same things regarding this very God had also been said by Plotinus, Diogenes, Plato, Orpheus, Sophocles, the Sibyls, and many others.

Franck's eclecticism—especially against the background of the bitter confessional conflicts in northern Europe—is committed to a clear concept of tolerance. As already had been the case in Hellenism, the idea that something remained identical in its ideal, spiritual essence, though articulated differently by diverse cultures and religions, served both as the basis and methodological foundation of his eclecticism and as a decisive argument for tolerance. With its stress on the concept of spirit and its Platonic doctrine of knowledge, Hermeticism well suited Franck's spiritualism and tolerant thought. It is thus no surprise that Franck, during the final year of his life, translated the *Corpus Hermeticum* into German, a text that was never printed.

Hermeticism in the Service of Promoting Tolerance

Christian apologetics had used Hermeticism to demonstrate that the Christian religion was consistent with the philosophy and theology of the ancient world. By the sixteenth century, however, circumstances had changed, and Christianity had become the cultural matrix, but, even then, Hermeticism served to indicate the compatibility of various cultures and religions. Indeed, once again Hermeticism served Christian apologetics. An especially important advocate of Christianity who invoked Hermes Trismegistus and his writings was Philippe de Mornay (1549–1623). This confessed adherent of the Reformation was a widely traveled man. He worked for Henry IV, who appointed him governor of Saumur. Mornay's work, *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrétienne contre les athées, épicuriens, payiens, juifs, mohamétans, et autres infidèles* (Treatise on the truth of the Christian religion, against the atheists, Epicurians, pagans, Jews,

Mohammedans, and other unbelievers), appeared in 1581 and was a major publishing success. It went through many editions in France and was also translated into a number of vernaculars, including German in 1616; from 1583 on, it was also accessible in Latin editions.

Mornay wanted to defend the truth of Christianity against the assaults of heretical traditions by pointing to its natural truth. It was not possible to conceive of any other than the God of Christianity, and even its critics had possessed the core of Christian dogmas. He particularly wanted to attest monotheism and the doctrine of the Trinity in ancient religions by referring to Hermeticism.

In the *Pimander* Hermes Trismegistus had written about the sole God and creator of all, and, in this respect, he was a witness for the venerable antiquity of monotheism. Mornay cited extensively from the first chapter of the *Poimander,* claiming to see in it the same message as in Genesis. In all important statements, the Hermetic doctrines concurred with the theology of Christianity. Using many citations Mornay sought to make it clear that Hermes had already taught that God's creation was accomplished by means of his Word, and the Word was synonymous with "his Son." According to the Hermetic writings, the third hypostasis of God was the Holy Spirit, as in Christianity. Mornay, the confessed Lutheran, wished to recognize in these correspondences a special similarity between the Hermetic writings and the Gospel of John: "that he used the same Word as the evangelist John used [. . .] In the same way, many hundreds of years earlier, the Platonists published his [Mercury's] books in the Greek language."[36]

Like Franck, Mornay was less concerned with favoring Hermeticism above other religions and philosophies than in promoting tolerance: "And thus Zoroaster and Mercury responded and spoke well, the latter for the Egyptians and the former for the Persians. For sages should be heard in what concerns wisdom proper for all their people." Just as he did for Hermes, Mornay expressed appreciation for Orpheus and Pythagoras, for Philo, and for many other sages of antiquity. It is striking that Mornay restricts himself largely to writers in the Platonic tradition. His apology for Christianity is predominantly a compilation of citations and excerpts. Only seldom does he offer any commentary, contenting himself with bringing together fragments of texts that are supposed to speak for themselves in the context of the respective chapters.

Mornay deserves attention less for the originality of his image of Hermes than for his concern to explain various religious and philosophical traditions as part of *heilsgeschichte* (salvation history), a point of view that, in the framework of "eclectic tolerance," was widespread in the early modern period. As ancient Egypt's most important theologian, Hermes was, of course, part of a history that was sometimes concealed but nevertheless would be essentially and interpretatively uncovered and seen as a history of the Christianphilosophical spirit in which Christianity, Greek philosophy, Hermeticism, and Zoroastrianism were united. Here, the "Mosaic distinction" between Christian monotheism and pagan polytheism, between truth and falsehood, largely dissolves.[37] Neither Mornay nor Franck was concerned with distinction or exclusion. The principal narrative is not the Exodus, but the story of the primeval knowledge of all men, which was spread throughout the various cultures and was the common basis of many cultures and religions. The God who was the subject of this tradition of primeval wisdom was a universal God, for he was the creator of this world but transcendent in his essence. He had revealed himself in his creation, as he had also revealed himself in the Bible and in the Hermetic texts. But he was far more than what these revelations expressed, and therefore he could not be expressed exactly through dogma. The theological-philosophical Hermetica address this very matter: from the Hermetic point of view, the vision of the divine itself is not directly representable, and not even the twenty-four philosophers had been able to find a decisive definition of God. This God is not completely merged in this world; he is distanced in his essence from human logic and from the boundaries of space and time. This divine concept is unsuited to the dogmatic persecution of an alleged heresy; rather, it opens men's eyes to the dignity and sanctity of all other concepts of the divine.

But the revelatory character of the Hermetic writings was also subject to a different interpretation. If the Adamic primeval wisdom is viewed as a privileged access to God and an adequate understanding of his creation, Hermeticism could also become dogmatic and lead to polemics against heretics. In particular, the Hermetic legitimation legends of alchemo-Paracelsism served the struggle against those who held to other creeds.

Franck and Mornay valorized the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and, historically, these thinkers belonged to the philosophical-theological tradition of Hermeticism. They promoted tolerance and approached Hermeticism from an academic distance. The natural philosophical, alchemical writings were more clearly stamped by a confessional rhetoric. Such Hermetic tractates often begin with an invocation of Christ and an assurance that they are firmly rooted in Christian belief. How strongly these texts are characterized by a religious-existential self-understanding is revealed in the initial didactic dialogue between "Senior" and "Adolphus" in the *Occulta Philosophia* (Hidden philosophy), which is attributed to Basilius Valentinus.[38] The anonymous author depicts a dialogue between an older, experienced Hermetist, who is endeavoring to understand nature and the miracle of the alchemical process, and a younger man, who is skeptical of the possibilities of alchemical transmutations. In search of true happiness, he is instructed by the older man in a dialogue concerning important themes of Hermeticism. Adolphus, on his way to Rome, is warned by Senior regarding the superficialities of the world: "Rome-Sodom" is "an earthly paradise full of voluptuousness and worldly pleasure, and forgetfulness of divine bliss."[39] In entirely the same sense as Franck's spiritualism, warning is issued not to fall under the spell of the superficialities, for they threaten to conceal the spirit, "and like a superficial, mindless letter of the alphabet, there is no spirit there."

Hermes depicted as a man from the East, bearing a model sphere as a sign of his astrological knowledge. The accompanying text extols him, invoking the Church Fathers, as the prophet Mercurius Termaximus. Jean Jacques Boissard, *Tractatus* [. . .] *de divinatione & magicis praestigiis* (Oppenheim, c. 1615), p. 140.

The same is true regarding knowledge of nature. First come God and correct belief, for we "must [. . .] in all we do first consider piety, and not the world or nature." Every form of natural philosophy must therefore be

measured against the word of God. In no way should one rely on the capability of human reason. Senior thus advises:

> Go on both parts, on God's word, in pursuit of nature, for they already proceed from God and should lead back to him, for the word is a straight scepter, just as nature is a straight line for all creation, and thus both are a straight path to soul and body, by which a righteous scholar of God is to be recognized; of which Aristotle knew nothing that was true but rather lumbered as best he could, like a blind man, although he was excellent above others in human reason, yet nothing but darkness, along with all his pupils."[40]

Knowledge of the true essence of the world can only be sought from the Holy Spirit, and it can be sought successfully only by not becoming lost in worldly, immanent reason. Aristotle, who serves here as the incarnation of pure human reason, was extraordinarily clever for a man, but he was not truly wise, for he had not allowed himself to be guided by the word of God. Here lay one of the principal demands placed on the adherents of Hermeticism. They were to be led primarily by divine revelation, and they were to pursue natural philosophy in this spirit. The unity of the two books of God, the Bible and the Book of Nature, implies no validity stemming from their common origin; rather, this unity has its methodological precedence in God's written revelation. Senior thus opts for the traditional model of an agreement between the two books of God and against the contemporary demand of Aristotelianism that nature should be investigated without recourse to divine revelation.

This theory of knowledge finds its counterpart in ethical maxims. Adolphus should not surrender himself to the superficiality of the world and forget the Last Judgment, for then, at the latest, every superficiality will lose its luster. A good Christian must, and this emerges also from the maxims of Hermetic philosophy,

> always heed and attend to truth and righteousness with prayer for the aid of the Holy Spirit, which teaches us to know all that is spiritual. We must take great care lest we remain mired in the earthly labyrinth, but rather break free and pursue the good, yea, spend no day, no hour uselessly, but all for the honor of God and the good of our neighbor.[41]

Senior, the incarnation of Hermetic reason, here advocates a *carpe diem* ethos that was typical of the early modern period. Youth should recall its mortality and, in view of reward and punishment in the next life, dedicate itself to the knowledge of God in nature. The author of the *Occulta Philosophia* thus does not draw conclusions as radical as those of Franck. For him, Judeo-Christian revelation has objective validity. Here, the spirit can be suitably grasped in the outer word, and the Bible is the valid standard for morals and knowledge.

Like many other texts of alchemo-Hermeticism, the dialogue between Senior and Adolphus indicates the precedence of the Bible in science. Only with biblical guidance should the Hermetist, inspired by the spirit of God, devote himself to observing nature and recognizing God as its creator. The methodological self-understanding of every text that expresses support for Hermeticism is characterized by the close connection between religion and natural history, a fact that had consequences for natural philosophy. As a science, Hermeticism was also a religion, and the scientist also had to be a theologian. Senior bids Adolphus not only to study diligently but above all to pray, so as to receive the spirit of God: "the kingdom of God should first be sought: God will grant all the rest."[42]

4. Two Paths of Hermeticism in the Early Modern Period

With the translation of the writings of Plato, Plutarch, Apuleius, and Iamblichus, the humanism of the early modern period inherited pagan antiquity's image of Egypt, and in choosing between the options offered by the early Church Fathers, it chose that which was friendlier toward Egypt. In the mid-fifteenth century Marsilio Ficino absorbed these concepts, produced a first Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* and interpreted Hermes Trismegistus as the founder of a philosophical tradition of revelation whose followers included Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato.

Pico and Ficino could understand Hermeticism as a complement to Christian revelation, for they made a distinction between inward and outward, between the divine, spiritual content of a doctrine and its outward form, which was culturally and temporally conditioned. Their concern was the integration of various religious and philosophical doctrines, one of which was Hermeticism. The Hermetic tradition was well suited to this

search for a common denominator, for already in antiquity this doctrine had been renowned for its distinction between form and content.

Whereas the philosophers of the Italian Renaissance made use of the Hermetica we classify as philosophical-theological, other texts stood at the very center of the northern European Hermeticism of alchemo-Paracelsism. These texts were mostly alchemical Hermetica that had been translated from Arabic into either Latin or the vernacular languages. In the framework of the legitimation legends, Hermeticism was considered the only legitimate heir of the Adamic primeval knowledge and of Christian piety, and it was Paracelsus who revived it. The adherents of this northern tradition passionately battled Aristotelian philosophy in the name of Hermes Trismegistus; they saw it as un-Christian, as inspired by the Devil, and therefore unsuited to an understanding of nature, for it took the superficial to be absolute and thus could not discern the hidden essence of things. Hermeticism was viewed as a symbolic doctrine capable of penetrating into the true heart of things and perceiving the mystery of nature.

In the early modern period Hermeticism was characterized by a clear profession of Christian religion. Sebastian Franck viewed Hermes' writings as an adequate alternative to Judeo-Christian revelation. Mostly, however, emphasis was placed on the inner harmony between Hermeticism and Christianity. In his defense of Christianity, Mornay used Hermeticism to bridge the gap between the confessions and to demonstrate that the central dogmas of Christianity were evidence of a religion of nature and reason. The adherents of alchemo-Paracelsism, however, saw themselves struggling between Hermetic and Aristotelian doctrines, a struggle in which they were heirs to an orthodox tradition that stretched from Adam and Hermes Trismegistus to Paracelsus, and which was true philosophy for all Christians. Natural philosophy, therefore, was also theology, for to understand nature meant to understand God. What was fundamental was not, as in the physico-theology of the eighteenth century, the concept of the common origin of God's revelation in the Book of Nature and the Book of Revelation. Rather, the absolute precedence of the Bible was the basis and the yardstick of natural science.

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1. The translation follows that of Eckhard Kessler on the Internet, at http://www.philhum-ren.uni-muenchen.de/php/Kessler/VL2003s/2003s09.htm.

2. K. H. Dannenfeldt counts twenty-four editions up to 1641; see "Hermetica philosophia," in *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries,* ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1960), pp. 138–139.

3. Frederick Purnell, "Francesco Patrizi and the Critics of Hermes Trismegistos," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 6 (1976): 155–178.

4. Giovanni Pico della Miorandola, "De genere dicendi philosophorum," in E. Garin, *Filosofi italiani del Quattrocento* (Florence, 1942), p. 440.

5. Latin text and English translation: S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico' s 900 Theses (1486),* Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies 167 (Tempe, Ariz., 1998), pp. 340–343.

6. Thomas Leinkauf, "Rationale Strukturen im Hermetismus der Frühen Neuzeit," in *Antike Weisheit und kulturelle Praxis: Hermetismus in der Frühen Neuzeit,* ed. Anne-Charlott Trepp and Hartmut Lehmann, pp. 41–61 (Göttingen, 2001).

7. Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven, 1958), p. 24.

8. Frances A. Yates, "Die hermetische Tradition in der Renaissanceforschung," in *Giordano Bruno und die englische Renaissance* (Berlin, 1989), p. 83.

9. On Patrizi's Hermeticism, see Karl Schulmann, "Francesco Patrizi und die hermetische Philosophie," in Quispel, ed., *Die Hermetische Gnosis,* pp. 345–361.

10. Translation based on that of Anna Laura Puliafito Bleuel, "Hermetische Texte in Francesco Patrizis *Nova de Universalis Philosophia,*" in *Das Ende des Hermetismus: Historische Kritik und neue Naturphilosophie in der Spätrenaissance,* ed. Martin Mulsow, p. 237 (Tübingen, 2002).

11. Maria Muccillo, "Rossellis 'scholastischer' Hermetismus," in Mulsow, *Das Ende des Hermetismus,* p. 76.

12. On German Hermeticism and its connections to Renaissance Hermeticism, see Wilhelm Kühlmann, "Der 'Hermetismus' als literarische Formation: Grundzüge seiner Rezeption in Deutschland," *Scientia et Poetica* 3 (1999): 145–157.

13. Christoph Balduff, "Kurtzer/deutlicher und warer Unterricht/von der geheimten und verborgenen Kunst Chymia," in Joachim Tancke, ed.,

Promptuarium Alchemiae (Leipzig, 1610), pp. 9–10.

14. Tancke was born in Brandenburg in 1557 and studied in Leipzig, where he completed his eduction in 1592 with a doctorate in philosophy and medicine. After defending his dissertation, *De chirurgia,* he was appointed Professor of Surgery and Anatomy at Leipzig University in 1595, and he held this position until his death in 1609.

15. Joachim Tancke, "On the Dignity and Use of Alchemy," foreword to *Promptuarium Alchemiae* (Leipzig, 1610), I, 7 r.

16. Ibid., I, 8 v. –II, 1 r.

17. Ibid., III, 2 r.

18. Ibid., III, 2 v. –III, 3 r.

19. Ibid., III, 2 v.

20. Ibid., III, 8 r. –v.

21. On Figulus, see Joachim Telle, "Benedictus Figulus: Zu Leben und Werk eines deutschen Paracelcist," *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 22 (1987): 303–326.

22. Benedictus Figulus, *Pandora Magnalium Naturalium* (Strassburg, 1608), p. 2 v.

23. Ibid., p. 4 r.

24. Ibid., p. 5 r.

25. Ibid., p. 6 v.

26. Ibid., p. 7 v.

27. Paracelsus, *Aurora Philosophorum,* in idem, *Werke,* vol. 5, ed. Will-Erich Peukert, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt, 1991), p. 3.

28. Ibid., p. 6. The brief citations that follow are from pp. 6–8.

29. Anonymous, *LIBER APOCALYPSIS AB ILLUSTRISSIMO VIRO AUREOLO THEOPHRASTO Helvetico* (n.p., 1604), p. 129.

30. Richard van Dülmen, "Volksmagie und Hexenkult," in idem, ed., *Kultur und Alltag in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Munich, 1994), vol. 3, pp. 78–96.

31. Cited after Christoph Dejung, "Sebastian Franck," in *Literatur Lexikon: Autoren und Werke deutscher Sprache,* ed. Walther Killy (Munich, 1989), vol. 3, p. 468.

32. Sebastian Franck, *Guldin Arch* (Augsburg, 1538), p. 47 v. The two citations that follow are also from this page.

33. Sebastian Franck, *Verbütschiert Buch,* sheet 428 r. Cited after Barbara Bauer, "Die Philosophie des Sprichworts bei Sebastian Franck," in

Sebastian Franck (1499– 1542), ed. Jan-Dirk Müller, Wolfenbüttler Forschungen 56 (Wiesbaden, 1993), p. 195.

34. Franck, *Guldin Arch,* p. 48 r.

35. Ibid., p. 48 v.

36. Philippe de Mornay, *De Veritate Religionis Christianae, oder/Dass die Christliche Religion/die rechte wahre Religion sey. Ein Buch* [. . .] *wider die Atheos, welche gar keinen Gott glauben/wider die Epicurer/Heyden/Juden/Mahumedisten und andere Ungläubige* (Rotenburg ob der Tauber, 1616), p. 123. The following citation is also from this page.

37. Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich, 2003), esp. "*Theologia Prisca* und die Aufhebung der Mosaischen Unterscheidung," pp. 107–111.

38. Anonymous, *Occulta Philosophia: Von den verborgenen Philosophischen Geheimnussen der heimlichen Goldblumen/und Lapis Philosophorum, was derselbige: und wie zu Erlangung dessen zu procediren/aussführlicher Bericht in einem philosophischen Gespräch verfasset/sampt DER Schmaragd Taffel/Parabol/Symbolis, und 18. sonderbaren Figuren/der hochberühmten Philosophen Hermetis Trismegisti, und F. Basilii Valentini* [. . .] (Frankfurt am Main, 1613).

39. Ibid., p. 3.

40. Ibid., p. 6.

41. Ibid., pp. 6–7.

42. Ibid., p. 36.

IV Seventeenth Century

High Point and Decline

1. Casaubon and the Dating of the Hermetic Texts

The year 1614 witnessed an important caesura in the history of Hermeticism,[1] for in that year, in London, the philologist Isaac Casaubon[2] published a book opposing the chronology of Cesare Baronio. Of the 773 folio pages of Casubon's *De Rebus Sacris et Ecclesiasticis* (On sacred and ecclesiastical matters), only a few were devoted to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, but even they assured the book's importance in the history of scholarship. Casaubon attacked Cesare Baronio's discussion of the so-called pagan prophets, namely, those pagans, including Hermes Trismegistus, who supposedly had foreseen the coming of Christ. Casaubon questioned the generally accepted antiquity of the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, maintaining that they did not record ancient Egyptian wisdom but were actually a conglomeration of Platonic and Christian concepts written after the lifetime of Christ. Casaubon pointed to many correspondences between the content of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and that of the Bible. For example, he compared the passage, "If you do not first hate your body, my son [Tat], you cannot love yourself" (*CH* IV, 6) to the passage in John 12, 25, "Those who love their life lose it; and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." This correspondence, according to Casaubon, was a sign that, because the concepts in the *Corpus Hermeticum* referred to the texts of the New Testament, they must have been written at a later date. It would be absurd, Casaubon argued, to assume that the mysteries of the divine were revealed to pagans earlier and more clearly than to Christians and Jews.

The *Corpus Hermeticum* uses concepts that, in their abstractness, cannot possibly have originated in the allegedly primeval time of Hermes Trismegistus. If the writings of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are, in fact, clearly pre-Christian, they should display no significant stylistic difference from those of the oldest Greek writers such as Herodotus. The language, however, clearly uses a later style; in particular, it employs many words that appeared in Greek only after the birth of Christ. Casaubon did not believe in the authorship of an age-old Hermes Trismegistus, and he even spoke of a forger: "that imposter liked to steal not only the sacred doctrines but the words of Sacred Scripture as well."[3] Not only Christian but also Platonic influences could be shown. A striking example that proves the *Corpus Hermeticum* could scarcely be dated to the period of Moses is its mention of the sculptor Phidias, who lived in the fifth century b.c.e. Casaubon considered it quite possible that there had been a sage named Hermes Trismegistus, who might, in fact, have lived in a remotely ancient period of time, but he could not possibly have been the author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. These texts were therefore forgeries with which Christians had sought to win pagans over to their doctrine.

Although contemporaries severely criticized Casaubon's book, his dating of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was widely accepted. Among scholars, Hermes Trismegistus no longer enjoyed the legendary reputation that had been accorded him in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For many scholars of the seventeenth century, the close connection of the Hermetic texts with Egypt had been eliminated, and when they wrote about Egypt, they seldom referred to the *Corpus Hermeticum*. For example, Herman Witsius, in his *Aegyptiaca*, drew mostly on Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris*, on Diodorus's *Library of History*, and on Herodotus's *Histories*. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the study of Egypt had largely been an analysis of Hermeticism, but, from now on, Egypt and Hermeticism went their separate ways. Casaubon had made the age of the texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus into a matter of contention.

Casaubon, strictly speaking, had simply turned the argumentation of the *prisca sapientia* upside down. Employing all due philological care, one could, in the wake of Casaubon's publication, object that the textual correspondences showed only that the biblical and Hermetic traditions drew on the same basic divine revelation. In this inner conceptual consistency of the two traditions, Marsilio Ficino had seen an indication that the *Corpus*

Hermeticum was part of the *prisca theologia*, and all of alchemoParacelsism had considered this consonance as natural, for Moses and Hermes had received their revelation from the same Holy Spirit. One could also argue, with Iamblichus, that the Hermetica preserved in Greek had been translated from the Egyptian language, and were stages of the editing of a work that was much older in its philosophical and theological content.

Cudworth's Attempt to Rehabilitate Hermeticism

Hermeticism received one of its most distinguished expressions in the work of the so-called Cambridge Platonists. The representatives of this school were connected with the Protestant faith, and were enthusiastic students of Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Even after Casaubon's critique, Marsilio Ficino's philosophy and his image of Hermes exercised an influence on the writings of Ralph Cudworth, Henry More, and Herbert of Cherbury.

Ralph Cudworth staunchly defended the *Corpus Hermeticum*. From 1654 on he was Master of Christ's College at Cambridge and a member of the Royal Society. In 1678 he published his principal, comprehensive work, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe,* which was an attempt to refute the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and atheism.[4] All men necessarily possess, according to Cudworth, the concept of the one God whom Christians also worship. This fact showed, Cudworth observed, that Christian religion is characteristic of all high cultures and necessary for true human existence. Like Mornay a century before him, Cudworth used the example of Hermeticism in an attempt to establish that thinking man could conceive of none other than the triune God.

Beneath the polytheistic surface of Egyptian religion, Cudworth wished to see a monotheistic core, and, to this end, he called on many writers of classical and late classical antiquity. The Egyptians had distinguished between a "vulgar and fabulous" theology and one that was "arcane, recondite, and true." The latter was taught "by Fables or Allegories, and by Symbols or Hieroglyphicks."[5] Moses was initiated into this "Hieroglyphick Learning and Metaphysical Theology,"[6] and thus into Egyptian monotheism. This esoteric, scarcely accessible monotheistic doctrine, according to Cudworth, manifested itself in the Hermetic writings. In his

argument, Cudworth in no way overlooked Casaubon's criticism of the usual dating of the Hermetic texts. He maintained, however, that Casaubon was insufficiently discriminating in his research and that his arguments applied only to two or three of the tractates in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Thus Casaubon had subjected all the heterogeneous material to a single verdict and, based on this error, had declared the *Corpus Hermeticum* a Christian work.

> And probably he was lead into this mistake, by reason of his too securely following that vulgar Error [. . .] that all that was published by Ficinus under the name of Hermes Trismegist, was but one and the same Book *Paemander*, consisting of *several Chapters*, whereas they are all indeed so many Distinct and Independent Books, whereof *Paemander* is only placed First.[7]

Some of the Hermetic texts should, in fact, be redated, according to Cudworth, but not all of them: Casaubon's critique did not apply to the *Asclepius* and other books. Cudworth believed in the existence of a Thoth, who was called Hermes by the Greeks and Mercury by the Romans. From classical literature, he derived an image of Hermes as the "first inventor of the arts and sciences" and of "hieroglyphic learning," and also the conveyer of an antediluvian knowledge.

Although traces of revisions from the Christian period could be discerned in the Hermetic texts, they did not speak against the possibility that the original texts were considerably older. Cudworth rejected Casaubon's argument, not just formally but also regarding its content, contending that, because the Platonists and Pythagoreans, and the Greeks as a whole, had derived their doctrines from Egypt, Casaubon's historical and critical attack could be inverted, making it possible to argue along the lines of the Hermetic legitimation legends:

> But First, it is here considerable, that since Pythagorism, Platonism and the Greek Learning in general, was in great part derived from the Egyptians, it cannot be concluded, that whatsoever is Platonical or Grecanical, therefore was not Egyptian.[8]

Some scholars, even after Casaubon's redating, were thus able to express esteem for Hermes Trismegistus and the Hermetic texts. Although Casaubon's critique had largely won the day, it did not irrevocably reverse the verdict regarding Hermeticism.

Critique and End of Hermeticism?

Casaubon was not the first to question the extremely early date attributed to the Hermetic texts. Also skeptical was the Calvinist Matthieu Berodale, who suggested that the writings were forged. In 1575 Berodale wrote:

> Some claim that Hermes is older than Pharaoh, as Suidas said. It is clear from the work called *Paemander* that is ascribed to him that this view is false. For it mentions the Sibyls, who were many centuries after Pharaoh. Also, the Aesculapius to whom Hermes is writing mentions Phidias, who lived in the time of Pericles. It is thus clear that that book of Mercurius Trismegistus is forged.[9]

That the Sibyls are mentioned cannot be blamed on the *Asclepius*, for it was Ficino who introduced them in his translation, and yet the argument here is similar to Casaubon's: many indications speak against a text from remote antiquity and in favor of a forgery.

Adrien Turnèbe (1512–1565) had already pointed out that the mention of Phidias in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (XVIII, 4) showed that this text could not have stemmed from a primeval Hermes Trismegistus. In 1567 his pupil, Gilbert Genebrard (1535–1597), dated the *Corpus Hermeticum* to the fourth century b.c.e., for the Egyptians had first learned the Greek language with the Hellenization of Egypt. Prior to the conquest of Alexander, it had scarcely been possible for Egyptians to write in Greek. In the second edition of his *Chronographia*, published in 1580, Genebrard carried his dating proposal further, remarking that the *Pimander* mentioned the Sibyls, who had lived centuries after Moses. Like Casaubon later, and Turnèbe before him, he also adduced the mention of Phidias as a decisive criterion for redating the *Corpus*.

For Frances A. Yates, the appearance of Casaubon's critique of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in 1614 marked the end of the Renaissance.[10] And Anthony Grafton sees a caesura in the history of Hermeticism, for in

learned circles there remained scarcely a defender of the legendary antiquity of the Hermetic writings. Scholars widely accepted a redating of the *Corpus*, and even the thesis of a forgery in the first centuries of the present era.

Cudworth's defense of Hermeticism did not remain without consequences, not for the image of Egypt but for Hermeticism itself. As Jan Assmann pointed out, his examination of the Hermetic texts showed that the important question was no longer that of dating and chronology but rather the authenticity of Hermetic thought. Cudworth saw an articulation of authentic ancient Egyptian thought in some of the Hermetic texts, and, in fact, connections do exist between the theological developments of the New Kingdom in ancient Egypt and the "One-and-All" doctrine of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In the seventeenth century, however, this point could not be demonstrated on the basis of original Egyptian sources, for these could not be read prior to the nineteenth century. Hermeticism thus lost much of its prestige: the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were no longer counted as a valid expression of ancient Egyptian wisdom.

Casaubon's book had, at first, no repercussions on the Hermes Trismegistus of the alchemists and Paracelsists, for his critique seemed irrelevant to the texts that concerned them. Others, however, cast doubt on the age and authenticity of the Hermetic texts on which alchemo-Hermeticism relied. Thus, Nicolas Guibert (1547–1620) maintained that the *Tabula Smaragdina* had to be inauthentic, and that it could not possibly have stemmed from Hermes Trismegistus, for the ancients had not once mentioned alchemy by name. In the *Tabula*, moreover, gold and silver were designated by the names of planets, a practice introduced by Proclus in his commentary on the *Timaeus*.[11]

In his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (The Egyptian Oedipus) of 1652–54, the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher[12] was one of the few writers to include not only the *Corpus Hermeticum* but also the *Tabula Smaragdina* among the writings of Hermes Trismegistus. He also cited a number of Arab Hermetica, both in Arabic and Latin translation.

Kircher, in his book, does not doubt that the ancient Egyptian kings were able to amass rich treasures by obtaining gold, but the gold, he contends, was acquired by mining, not alchemy. Entirely unclear is who the author of the *Tabula Smaragdina* was or where and when he lived or in what language he originally composed this tractate. This text remained unknown,

however, to the Greek philosophers who came to Egypt to study Hermetic wisdom; it was probably a forgery ascribed to Hermes, the "most ancient of all philosophers," to lend it a greater antiquity and thus also higher prestige.

Kircher understood the *Tabula Smaragdina* as a collection of paraphrases of the *Pimander*, the *Asclepius*, and writings of Iamblichus and Proclus. He saw the *Tabula* as nothing more than the expression of a "One-andAll" doctrine that was already to be found in Plato's *Parmenides* and in the Hermetic *Asclepius*. In this way he integrated the alchemical Hermeticism of the *Tabula Smaragdina* into the history of philosophical-theological texts and of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

Kircher attests to the variety and lack of clarity of the Hermetic texts. His *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* contains a complete copy of the text of the *Tabula Smaragdina* and a detailed commentary on it, along with lengthy passages from the *Asclepius* and the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

Kircher entirely overlooks Casaubon's critique of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, but he assumes that Hermes Trismegistus is a composite of several historical personalities.[13]

Conflict over the Legitimacy of the "Hermetic Art"

The *Tabula Smaragdina* and the Hermetic texts of alchemical content do not seem, at first, to have been affected by Casaubon's critique. The situation changed fundamentally, however, in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1648 Hermann Conring, Professor of Medicine at Helmstedt University, published a work entitled *De hermetica Aegyptiorum vetere et nova Paracelsicorum medicina liber unus* (A book on the ancient Hermetic medicine of the Egyptians and the new medicine of the Paracelsists), in which he challenged the validity of alchemo-Paracelsism and its legitimation legends.

Conring's purpose was to investigate whether the "school of Paracelsus" could rightly appeal to a Hermetic tradition. In a source analysis of the Hermetic literature, chiefly texts of classical and late classical antiquity, he sided with Casaubon, affirming that all books that laid claim to being written by Hermes Trismegistus were forgeries. Evidently, Conring contended, there was never a man with this name, and the legendary cultural innovations also did not amount to much. The medicine of the

Egyptians was pure superstition, far surpassed by that of the Greeks; the same was true for mathematics, physics, and philosophy.

After this general attack on the Paracelsists' image of Egypt, Conring turned to his actual opponent. Although the new Hermetic medicine had almost nothing in common with ancient Hermetic medicine, it, too, was to be rejected, for it was magic, irreconcilable with either Christian belief or general custom. The Paracelsists were harming, not helping, their patients.

Nevertheless, Hermeticism enjoyed, as Conring acknowledged, an uninterruptedly good reputation. He wondered only how it was that this Hermeticism laid claim to have originated with Hermes Trismegistus, and how it was that the adherents of Paracelsist doctrines called themselves "Hermetists," not "Paracelsists." Conring suspected that Paracelsus and his followers intentionally abused the traditional esteem for Hermes Trismegistus to create prestige for their own doctrines. Among the Paracelsists, the name of Paracelsus was closely connected with that of Hermes Trismegistus, and their cures had made their reputation under the name of Hermes Trismegistus. Theophrastus von Hohenheim and his earliest and most important adherents had never themselves declared support for Hermes. The similarity of ancient Egyptian and modern Paracelsist Hermeticism amounted to nothing more than self-aggrandizing and a theologically false understanding of the concept of revelation. Both traditions believed that they received direct, divine revelation that had been handed down in their texts. But the modern adherents of Hermes Trismegistus, though they adorned themselves with his name, knew absolutely nothing of the ancient Egyptian Hermetic doctrines. They erroneously presumed that Hermes was the creator of "chemiatric" medicine, and that they themselves stood in a tradition that this Egyptian had founded:

> It must in fact also be maintained that neither Paracelsus nor his disciples, who have assumed the name of Hermetists, have had any knowledge of ancient Hermetic medicine. At any rate, nothing is to be found in their writings of what we have collected and made note of above [in this text]. And for this reason, they have had no other reason to call themselves Hermetists than that they believed that the origin of alchemical medicine was in that master; it is with respect to these matters that these people give themselves airs.[14]

Conring disputed contemporary Hermeticism in two respects: the Paracelsist cures were useless, even dangerous, and their historical legitimation legends were without substance, as no connection existed between the content of Paracelsism and that of ancient Hermeticism. The appeal to ancient Egyptian Hermeticism was futile, for ancient Egyptian cultural innovations were grossly overrated, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not a text from remote antiquity.

Conring attacked only the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* that he knew from the editions of Patrizi and Ficino. He supported Patrizi's opinion that the portions of texts grouped together under the title *Poimander* should be viewed not as segments of a single, coherent text but as a heterogeneous collection of independent tractates. After reviewing Casaubon's critique in detail, he offered reason to think that some portions were written in the Graeco-Hellenistic, and not just the Christian, spirit, and to this extent could not count as Christian forgeries. After a brief paraphrase of the tractates of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Conring came to this conclusion:

> From all this, what we have said is truly clear: that these texts, which Marsilio Ficino first published and translated into Latin under the name *Poemander* are of diverse origin and by different authors, that it seems some are to be understood [as being] by Christians and others by Platonists, that they were fabricated under the name of Hermes, and that a very small amount seems to correspond to ancient Egyptian doctrine.[15]

Conring also cites some texts regarding the Philosophers' Stone, though without more detailed mention of them. There could be only remnants of Egyptian knowledge in certain Hermetic texts, and the rest were pure pseudepigrapha. Just as the Hermetic texts offered little genuine evidence of ancient Egyptian wisdom, so, too, Hermes Trismegistus could not be viewed as the most important founder of Egyptian culture. In particular, the Paracelsists' claim of Hermes' primacy in medical matters was absurd.

When Conring, a professor of medicine and adherent of Aristotle, attacked Hermeticism, defenders charged into the arena. In 1674 Olaus Borrichius, in direct opposition to Conring's invective, published *Hermetis*

Aegyptiorum et Chemicorum Sapientia (The wisdom of Hermes, the Egyptians, and the chemists).

The title of Borrichius's book, which exactly paralleled Hermann Conring's, could have been "Wie Du mir, so ich Dir" (Tit for tat). After attempting to establish the superiority and dignity of ancient Hermeticism, Borrichius affirmed that the Paracelsists, contrary to Conring's assertion, stood in a single Hermetic tradition with the ancient Egyptians. Paracelsus and his adherents cultivated a science that was not only ancient and venerable but also reasonable, and they were entirely correct in invoking the name of Hermes Trismegistus.

Borrichius cited Conring's invectives and tried to demonstrate, in detail, how the latter had erred in his judgments. In Borrichius's effort to stress the dignity of Hermes Trismegistus, his book grew into a compendium of ancient Hermetic citations, listing Conring's theses and references to demonstrate that Conring had incorrectly and inadequately interpreted these mostly classical and late classical sources. As heatedly as Conring disputed the dignity of Hermeticism, so Borrichius affirmed the exact opposite. The wisdom of the Egyptians was, even beyond medicine, extraordinary. Greco-Roman culture owed much to Egyptian culture, and therefore it was mindless to rank the former over the latter.

In defending Hermeticism, Borrichius did not respond to the redating of the *Corpus Hermeticum*; he did not mention Casaubon, nor did he attempt to defend the *Corpus Hermeticum*. He cited many remarks concerning Hermes Trismegistus, but very few by Hermes himself. This lack is all the more surprising, because, although Borrichius disagreed with nearly all Conring's theses, he overlooked his adversary's detailed discussion of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

The conflict between Conring and Borrichius, which was continued into yet other publications, served to emphasize that neither of these men ever distinguished between Hermes the theologian-philosopher and Hermes the father of alchemy. Conring used Casaubon's critique against alchemoParacelsism, but he did not acknowledge that the *Corpus Hermeticum* played only a minor role in the writings of the Paracelsists. Similarly Borrichius, in defending Hermes, also failed to make the distinction, and also seems to have seen no reason to do so. For him, the accounts regarding Hermes were more important than his texts. Obviously

he saw in the Hermetic texts no necessary, or even normative, basis for the *Ars Hermetica*.

2. Hermeticism and the Modern Natural Sciences

The question of the scientific credibility of Hermeticism was clearly posed in the course of the seventeenth century, with the rise of modern science. That the proponents of alchemy in this period staunchly affirmed its scientific character was part of their struggle for social recognition. But what lurked behind the assertion that they were promoting true science?

In the historiography of science, Hermeticism is often taken to be an escapist viewpoint of the early modern period. As a "non-'rationalistic' philosophy that found a strong subliminal resonance from the Reformation up to the nineteenth century,"[16] it has not been understood as a component of a scientific development according to the motto "from myth to reason." Its adherents have been considered lunatics or frauds, counterimages to such heroes of science as Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and Robert Boyle. Hermeticism has thus often been seen as the paradigm of an early modern science that fell entirely by the wayside with the scientific innovations of the seventeenth century. The positivistic historicism of the nineteenth century saw the *Ars Hermetica* as merely an "aberration in cultural history."[17]

Some scholars, however, have understood alchemy to be the basis of modern chemistry. It is known that even the heroes of the Enlightenment had an affinity for the "dark thinkers," for example, Newton intensively studied and made use of alchemical texts. Frances A. Yates's thesis regarding the importance of Hermeticism in the development of early modern science caused quite a sensation with its assertion that the magical-Hermetic tradition exerted a distinct influence on the origin of the modern sciences. With his knowledge and understanding, the Renaissance magus used the hidden powers of nature to bring the obscure to light, and thus was the prototype of the modern scientist who strives to dispel the mysteries of nature through his experiments.[18] But along with his magical-cabalistic numerological speculations, the magus had also already employed a quantifying method, which he used to make measurements, discern proportions, and try to symbolize the relationships between ontologically

differentiated beings. Hermeticism had understood the Copernican picture of the world as a magical symbol and thus established a close relationship between Hermetic beliefs and modern science.[19] According to Yates, the concept of mastering nature had already, at the end of the sixteenth century, brought scholars such as Patrizi, Campanella, and Bruno to the point where they were gathering all the sages together into a religion of nature and working on a program of social, metaphysical, and religious reform. Although the Church opposed these heterodox endeavors—indeed, Patrizi's *Nova de Universalis Philosophia* landed on the Index, Campanella was thrown into prison, and Bruno was burned—the methodology of natural magic represented by these three thinkers pushed its way into the modern sciences. This much is clear at least in the case of Giordano Bruno, who, using Hermetic texts, participated in the breakthrough of the Copernican revolution. And as for Copernicus (1473–1543) himself, had he not, if only in passing, appealed to the Hermetic texts to clarify his heliocentric image of the cosmos?

Yates's thesis found widespread acceptance but also staunch criticism. One opponent was Robert S. Westman, who demonstrated convincingly that the impulse to understand the cosmos according to the Copernican model did not follow from the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The thesis was untenable, Westman asserted, for none of the thinkers, who, according to Yates, were important representatives of the Hermetic tradition, had interpreted the Copernican image of the cosmos as a magical symbol. There was no actual Hermetic explanation of Copernicanism, and Bruno was the only thinker who connected the Copernican image of the cosmos with Hermeticism and the concepts of Ficino. Further, the concept of magus had no significant influence on the scientific revolution of the early modern period.[20]

Still, although Yates's thesis has been widely refuted, she succeeded in drawing attention to the fact that Hermeticism, as portrayed by Ficino and Bruno as part of Neoplatonic philosophy, was conceptually and scientifically state of the art in its day. Can we say the same of the Hermeticism of alchemo-Paracelsism?

Moritz von Hessen-Kassel had established a chair in alchemy at Marburg University, and among the university professors were adherents of the *Ars Hermetica* such as Olaus Borrichius and Joachim Tancke. Others, including Daniel Sennert (1572–1637), who was Professor of Medicine at Wittenberg,

strove for a synthesis of Paracelsist chemiatry and the doctrines of Aristotle and Galen. The relationship between the "Hermetic art" and the traditional science of the early modern period seems problematic but not incompatible. Did those writers who consciously and emphatically referred to Hermes Trismegistus share a particular concept of science?

Benedikt Nikolaus Petraeus displayed a demonstrative Enlightenment rhetoric in his *Critique über die Alchymistischen Schriften* (Critique of the alchemical texts).[21] He warned against these texts, complaining that they were mostly motivated by profit. He soon made it clear, however, that he did not represent a positivistic concept of science and nature. As in the older Hermetic texts, according to Petraeus, a true alchemist was required to be pious and to renounce worldly goods: "A true philosopher leaps only heavenward, derides that which the world derides in him!" (p. 6). And the critic should "not rashly run into the *sacrarium naturae* or the sanctuary of alchemy with unwashed hands" (p. 3). Only those who believed and understood were in a position to carry out the alchemical process. All others must fail because of their technical and intellectual inadequacies.

Success can be achieved not by reason alone, Petraeus contended, but by reading the classics of the alchemical-Hermetic tradition. Since many people did not understand the "oblique expressions and the meaning they conceal" (p. 9), they had to be patient and trust that, with time, God would "show an even better means and way" to an adequate understanding of the meaning of these texts. Because limited human reason was insufficient, it was necessary to read the classics in order to climb "the ladder of the sages" (p. 10) and attain true insight. Here, Petraeus displayed his trust in a model of bookish "mysteries" or revelation: God would communicate to the enthusiast for alchemical texts a hermeneutic key to reading and understanding the authorities of "Hermetic philosophy."

Because of the difficulty in understanding the doctrines of alchemy, which were "obscure, artificial words and enigmas" (p. 7), alchemy was discredited in the eyes of many critics and fools. But these doctrines were intended only for especially suitable men, and only these chosen persons could understand the texts as allegory. There had to be men who were capable of comprehending their mysterious language and had the technical skill to put what they read into practice. Only when an understanding of the texts was applied in relevant, practical ways would it be clear whether the texts had been understood and yielded their secrets to the reader. The

criterion of successful practice entailed, of course, no possibility of falsifying the theory. The failure of laboratory practice showed only that the text had not been correctly interpreted. The writings of the ancient sages thus had the status of unquestionable validity. Petraeus's *Critique* displayed the scientific understanding of an adherent of the *Ars Hermetica*. Employing the motif of revelation and the topos of the mystery of nature, Petraeus made a connection that often appears in the Hermetic texts of the seventeenth century: the connection between scientific understanding and an ethos of secrecy.

Initiation into the Mysteries of Hermetic Science

A Hermetist was someone who guarded a mystery that obliged him to secrecy. Many book titles display an obvious arcanophilia: *Arcanum Hermeticae Philosophiae* (The secret of Hermetic philosophy),[22] *Arcana Arcanissima* (The most secret secrets),[23] and *Elucidatio Secretorum* (Explanation of the secrets),[24] and, in subtitles, the reader is promised a *Concentrierte*[*s*] *Geheimnüss der Natur* (Concentrated mystery of nature)[25] or an *Elucidarius Purus Philosophicus De Universali Arcano* (Pure philosophical explanation of the secret of the universe).[26]

In the foreword to the first volume of his German-language collection of alchemical tractates, published in 1728, Friedrich Roth-Scholtz promised to present texts "that those with artistic taste and the enthusiast in search of the mystery of nature should enjoy." The reader of his collection could study "true wisdom and the great mysteries of nature."[27] What Roth-Scholtz understood by a "mystery" corresponded to the topos of the mystery of nature.[28] Mysteries of nature were considered to be the unseen causes of natural phenomena, which were hidden to the senses but could be discerned by reason. This topos originally had a purely epistemological significance, referring to the difficulties experienced by human cognition in understanding the causes of natural effects, but in the Middle Ages it acquired an ontological meaning. The "mystery of nature" was reinterpreted as a power that could be snatched away from nature, in the sense of a relationship between latent power and manifest transposition of this power in effect. Ontologically "mystery" meant a status of being of nature that does not stand necessarily opposite to the perceptible essence of the object but rather is distinct from it.

This ontological meaning constitutes a large part of the concept of "mystery" in the alchemical texts, and nearly every one of the titles mentioned above is to be understood in this sense. The point was to lift this mystery of nature so as to reveal the causes of natural processes, causes that were hidden from the senses. This notion was almost a maxim of Hermetic research: "Hermetic wisdom deals, in particular, with nature and its works; it investigates the mysteries that lie hidden within it."[29]

Against the background of the mystery of nature, the secrecy ethos in the Hermetica at first seems incomprehensible. Why should there be silence regarding knowledge of the latent forces of nature? Why should "what holds the world together in its inmost folds" be kept secret?

In the eyes of the Hermetists of the early modern period, great dangers were entailed in the possibility of having the forces of nature at one's disposal, in making use of the invisible powers and forces that rule the world. And when it came to the power of the Philosophers' Stone, the dangers of taking control of the world seemed especially clear. The Stone had far-reaching effects in conferring health and prosperity: it could act against all manifestations of mortality; it could aid in the preparation of gold and precious stones; and, as a medium of universal salvation, it could bestow "all temporal bliss, corporal health, and earthly luck."[30] It seemed to open a path to redemption that was no longer tied to the crucifixion of Christ and to divine autonomy in the act of salvation. The unbelieving, selfish person was to be kept, at all costs, far away from this powerful resource. Since it was immanent in the world, the medium of redemption, the Stone, had to be hidden:

> And when the philosophers found it by dint of great labor and industriousness, they obscured it with strange speech and mystery, lest it be revealed to the unworthy and the precious pearls be cast to swine, for if just anyone knew it, all industriousness and labor would cease, and man would devote himself to nothing but this one thing, and people would not live rightly, and the world would perish, for out of their miserliness and because of abundance, they would anger God.[31]

Maintaining the secret of the Stone was necessary to prevent the egoistic man from obtaining a this-worldly salvation that would leave him

unfettered by labor and need and thus unable to lead a life that was pleasing to God.

The authors of many Hermetic texts believed that a kind of initiation was needed so that the mystery regarding the Philosophers' Stone could only be communicated to the faithful and the understanding and would remain hidden from fools and unbelievers. A propaedeutic phase would prepare man and make him receptive to a second phase, when a revelation would be imparted. Those who wished to understand the Hermetic doctrines, so it was often stated, had to avoid all independent efforts to acquire the necessary understanding through their own intellect. Instead, they had to remain largely passive, "for it [is] impossible to discover this secret by means of one's own nitpicking; rather we must go to school with the wise and learn from them, so that this mystery will be known."[32] Only by purification can the intellect be prepared for revelation, and the mind must allow itself to be led. "For our intellect, which is in itself dark, must be lit by the sun of the living knowledge that God alone grants in the art of the secret wisdom."[33] If the adept in alchemy takes this path of enlightenment to arrive at knowledge of the Philosopher's Stone, which brings health and happiness, then God will maintain his redemptive autonomy. Because the Stone could not simply be found but had to be imparted to man through divine inspiration, the decision over salvation or damnation remained God's.

Enigma, symbol, and allegory were thus considered suitable means of making knowledge public but at the same time keeping it secret. This form of published secret ensured that the text would be understood by those to whom God had granted the necessary gifts. Through their comprehension of the texts, the worthy could be distinguished from the unworthy, who lacked comprehension. Thus the salutary properties of the Philosophers' Stone would not be accessible to those who should not have access, but those who were wise would be able to grasp the deeper meaning of the text: "The metaphors, similes, and allegories with which the wise have hidden the mystery of our secret philosophy will be obvious to us and no longer hidden."[34] Those who attained understanding by studying the Hermetic writings would acquire a hermeneutic key to the allegorical meanings of the texts.

In the foreword to Michael Sendivogius's *Dreyfaches chemischen Kleinod* (Threefold chemical jewel), the author warned against the desire to

understand a Hermetic text quickly and simply:

> But no one should imagine that all is so neatly written by the syllable and the character, spoon-fed, and ground out, for such would be contrary to God's command.[35]

Nevertheless this text will be plain and clear, with no question left open, for those who learned to understand it:

> [For] the true and clear light of nature shines into the most hidden corner and ignites the innermost treasure chamber; it reveals all secret things, and to the god-fearing, sensible, industrious investigator of this sacred and secret art, or, rather, God's gift, it extends the key and places it in his hand.[36]

For those who were wise and understanding, the "mystery" of the alchemists was only an *arcanum* to be discovered and understood, a mystery of nature they had to discern. But for fools it would remain a mystery, ever hidden and incomprehensible.

Hermetic Science and Modern Natural Sciences

The model of understanding through initiation was intended to immunize Hermetic texts against criticism. In the *Arcanum Hermeticae Philosophiae* (The secret of Hermetic philosophy), Jean d'Espagnet asked: Who showed the critics "the sanctuary of this sacred science and led them in?"[37] Because they had not been initiated into this knowledge, detractors were in no position to criticize. In many defenses of alchemy, we see discrediting of critics as incompetent dilettantes who lack the high moral and intellectual qualifications for mastering the alchemical processes. Only with difficulty can this inspiration be reconciled with the new science.

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century consisted, above all, in a change in the criteria of rationality. Impelled by an anti-authoritarianism directed against the monopoly on interpretation exercised by church and university scholasticism. It understood the search for truth not as a question of the interpretation of a tradition and its normative texts, but rather as work on nature. Observations, experiments, quantification, and

mathematical interpretation—methods leading to knowledge of the laws governing natural processes—were the credo of the new sciences. The study of nature was no longer a matter of reconstructing some long-forgotten knowledge, but of collecting and increasing new knowledge. The idea of the "hidden" thus lost its dignity; replacing the "mystery of nature" was nature itself as an object for research to uncover. Without necessary recourse to the Bible, the Book of Nature was read according to its own laws, lending encouragement to the secularization of the sciences. The two worlds were uncoupled: religion and science were no longer united.

The scientific revolution also brought with it a change in the relationship between the visible and the invisible.[38] Surface phenomena were understood to be the objects of research, and, in documenting observations of nature, methods of classification and quantification were systematized. With that, science entered the public stage. Scientific organizations such as the Royal Society and the Académie des Sciences institutionalized not only research, but considered the development and dissemination of science to be a general duty owed to the educated public.

This concept of science was clearly incompatible with the *Ars Hermetica*. The very object of Hermetic science was to negate the superficial. Hermetic researchers sought the *interna rerum*, the effective causes of nature, and, for this purpose, they believed it was necessary to penetrate the surface of natural phenomena and explore their depths. Thus they reproached the superficiality of Aristotelianism, believing, instead, that wisdom derived from the ability to see what lay beneath the surface.

Corresponding to the Hermetic-Platonic ontology of two levels was the hermeneutic of two levels. Just as the Hermeticist wished to penetrate into nature's hidden interior, so he wished to delve into the hidden meaning of the text. Many writers of Hermetic texts demanded an allegorical reading. The literal meaning was not to be believed, the truth of a text could be revealed only by interpreting it symbolically. This allegorical approach, however, was outside rational methodology; rather, it was guided by divine inspiration. Revelations, of course, were scarcely suited to public debate and scientific criticism. The fundamental ideal of the public nature of science, with its criterion of intersubjective review via criticism and control of research results, was incompatible with a hermeneutic of symbolism and with the concept of individual divine inspiration. Although some self-proclaimed philosophers of alchemy claimed to be making straightforward

accounts of the mysteries of nature, they failed to made good on this claim in their writings.

Hermeticism, with its hermeneutic, remained committed to a traditional belief in authority. Its adherents held that the doctrinal content of the authoritative texts of the *Ars Hermetica* could never be falsified but only verified—which is the opposite of a fundamental postulate of the philosophy of science. Although successful practice was a sign of the true, divinely inspired, competent Hermetist, failure in the laboratory could never refute the natural philosophical doctrine of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, the alchemists' Bible. Hermetic doctrine was thus categorically declared to be true and feasible. Because the task of the Hermetist, enlightened by spirit, was to understand the *sensus Hermeticus* of a text, the self-referentiality of many Hermetic writings and the belief that their intrinsic value lay in the very fact of their compilation, perhaps did not obstruct his view of nature. And, for the Hermetist, this belief immunized the Hermetic texts against a critical examination of their naturalphilosophical theses.

3. Hermeticism and Pietism

Post-Reformation Hermeticism cannot be unambiguously classified with any of the major confessions. But alchemo-Paracelsism did have an affinity for the Reformation movements: Senior hurled insults at the papacy and Paracelsus sympathized with the Reformers, but Hermeticism in no way merged into Protestantism. In Counterreformation circles, Athanasius Kircher and others made use of Hermetic literature and were among the heroes of early modern Hermeticism who had reservations regarding Protestantism: Paracelsus rejected superficial forms of religiosity, such as ornate churches, and Sebastian Franck polemicized against any form of institutionalized Christianity. In a counter move, at the end of the seventeeth century, Martin Luther pronounced his verdict against "fanatics" and set the fuse that would explode the conflict between mystical-Hermetic groups and orthodox Lutherans. At that historical point, the connection between Hermeticism and mystical traditions led to conflict over the Hermetic roots of Pietism.

Das Platonisch-Hermetische Christenthum (Platonic-Hermetic Christianity), written by Ehregott Daniel Colberg (1659–1698) and published in 1690, was a general attack on the so-called fanatical movements of the time. By means of a "historical account of the origin and various sects of contemporary fanatical theology,[39] Colberg, an orthodox Lutheran, wished to demonstrate that the fanatics were rooted in Platonism and Hermeticism, and thus were all heretical.

Colberg stressed that Paracelsists, Rosicrucians, Quakers, and Böhmists all appealed to Hermes Trismegistus as their spiritual father: "Today's fanatics boast that they derive their science from Hermes" (p. 90). These fanatics erroneously believed that Hermes was the vehicle of a primeval, Adamic wisdom. Colberg did not doubt that Hermes Trismegistus had been a real person, but he considered it an established fact that the man's supposed writings were pseudepigrapha. All the Paracelsists' legends about Hermes were a "baseless poem" (p. 99) with no historical evidence. In opposing the assertion that Hermetic doctrine originated in antediluvian or Mosaic antiquity, Colberg assumed that the texts dealing with the Philosophers' Stone were composed around the year 300 c.e. In his critique of the Paracelsists' image of Hermes, Colberg, along with Pierre Gassendi, relied primarily on Hermann Conring and Isaac Casaubon. The Paracelsic texts contained no ancient Egyptian teaching but rather Platonic and Christian doctrines "put together by heretics of the ancient Church" (p. 100). Colberg used the term "Platonic-Hermetic Christianity" to designate an illegitimate concoction of Christian content and pagan ideas. His thesis was as simple as it was trenchant: the fanatics belonged to a mystical tradition with the stamp of the medieval mystic Johannes Tauler and the "*theologia teutsch*" (German theology), but its most ancient roots lay in Platonism.

> If we read Hermes, Plato, the cabalists, the allegorists, Philo Judaeus, Origen, or Tauler, it becomes palpable: the modern masters have borrowed their doctrines and opinions from the same writers. (p. 98)

After Colberg's historical and genetic destruction of the Hermetic legitimation legends, which he modeled after Conring, Colberg could now attack all who invoked a Platonic-Hermetic heritage: he stigmatized Ficino

as a conjurer, and, in particular, attacked Paracelsus as immersed in a tradition packed with

> cabala, magia, chymia, and the ancient pagan authors who wrote about the Philosophers' Stone. In particular, he based himself on the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, Pythagoras, Plato, and their followers, wherein concourse with evil spirits did not little encourage him. (p. 187)

The authorities of the *prisca theologia*, whom Ficino and Lactantius saw as proto-Christian prophets of Christ, Colberg viewed as sacrificial offerings of a devilish inspiration. The legitimation legends of Hermeticism were thus upturned, for the Platonic philosophy from whose line of tradition they stemmed was no longer the complement to revelation but, instead, condemned as magical superstition.

Plato Mysticus or the Hermetic Devil

The orthodox Lutheran Friedrich Christian Bücher attacked Pietism using arguments similar to Colberg's. Already in his book *Menses pietistici, die Tieffe des Sathans in dem Hermetisch-Zoroastrisch-Pythagorisch-Platonisch-Cabbalistischen Christentum der Pietisten* (Pietistic menstruations, the depths of Satan in the Hermetic-Zoroastrian-Pythagorean-Platonic-Cabalistic Christianity of the Pietists), he made Hermeticism out to be one of the roots of Pietism. In 1699 his *Plato Mysticus* [. . .] *Pietistische Uebereinstimmung Mit der Heidnischen Philosophia Platonis Und seiner Nachfolger* (Mystical Plato . . . Pietistic agreement with the heathen philosophy of Plato and his successors) attempted to clarify the extent to which Pietism was descended from ancient paganism.[40] With Platonism, Bücher declared, devilish notions had slipped into the Pietism of Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705):

> From an evident parallelism of Spener's doctrines with Plato's philosophy, it will be made clear that, with time, a truly heathenish theology and the most dangerous devil-doctrines [. . .] were introduced into the Christian Church unnoticed. (unpaginated foreword)

Unlike Aristotelian philosophy, against which Spener repeatedly agitated, Platonism was a dangerous heresy. Anyone who assumed that Platonic Hermeticism was a prophetic precursor of Christianity was evilly deceived, according to Bücher, for heathenish-devilish doctrines were slipped in under the guise of feigned Christian concepts. For him, the Platonic tradition was a manifestation of decline, of heathen sorcery: "The philosophy of the Pythagoreans and Platonists was nothing more than a patchwork garment, a beggar's cloak pieced together out of teachings from ancient conjurers in Egypt, Thrace, Asia, and Persia" (p. 19). Plato had mixed Socrates' teachings with Egyptian and Pythagorean philosophemes. Even worse than Plato were "Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Apuleius, [. . . who] were obvious conjurers." Bücher took up the topos of travel to Egypt and radically reevaluated it: what was communicated to the Greeks in Egypt were not important cultural techniques but rather demonic-devilish practices that belonged to Platonic philosophy and were the basis of all heresies.

Pietistic Anti-Hermeticism

Spener, the "father of Pietism," in 1700, defended himself in print against these attacks, maintaining that he had built his doctrine exclusively on the basis of the Bible. And since there were incontestable parallels between his concepts and those of Plato, he reckoned that Plato had also read Holy Scripture.

Spener's defense appeared in the foreword to a book that was a lengthy *apologia* for Pietism and its roots, Balthasar Köpke's *Sapientia Dei in Mysterio Crucis Christi Abscondita* (The wisdom of God hidden in the mystery of Christ's Cross).[41] His central thesis was that the "origin of true mystical theology [. . .] is not to be sought in Plato and his writings but in Holy Scripture, in the Apostles and prophets, and in Lord Christ himself" (p. 1). He distinguished between true and false mystical traditions. True mystical theology began with Abraham and made its way to Egypt with Joseph, "who was sent to Egypt by God [. . .] bearing the secret wisdom, or the believing spirit of Abraham." All the achievements attributed to the Egyptians were owing to Joseph's deeds in Egypt:

> Various persons among them doubtless adopted this secret wisdom of Joseph, and it was then a glorious light of the true, salvational knowledge of God in the Messiah in Egypt in the time of Joseph [. . .] That is the origin of true mystical theology in Egypt. (p. 120)

Many Egyptian priests, according to Spener, responded to Joseph with envy and attempted to emulate his doctrine. Out of arrogance and stupidity, however, they endeavored to "suppress the true wisdom and spread false doctrine in its place." Egypt thus "fell into the most shameful idolatry and blindness [. . .] and built temples to the most loathsome creatures (before which human nature is appalled) and founded a special, idolatrous cult for them" (pp. 12–13). Yet the true wisdom did not completely disappear from Egypt, Spener observed. Envious as they were, the Egyptians did not wish to acknowledge that their wisdom had Jewish sources, and so they falsely maintained that Hermes Trismegistus had composed these writings:

> Meanwhile, the Egyptian sages retained much that was similar to the truth, but out of hate and envy, they did not wish to acknowledge that they had received it from Joseph and the descendants of Jacob. Rather, they attributed it to another author or originator, whom they called Hermes or Mercury, about whom various things are to be read among the heathen writers. (p. 13)

Hermeticism, Spener went on, thus contained traces of the true wisdom of the Jewish people, but Joseph's wisdom came to be mingled with pagan thought. The Hermetic texts were therefore "a beggar's cloak patched together out of Christian, Platonic, and Egyptian doctrine" (p. 15). If there had even been a Hermes, he was in no way the great sage of whom the ancient writers spoke; instead, "Hermes was the most distinguished servant [of King Mizraim] and a useful man in Egypt who contributed much that was good in Egypt, for which reason his memory was held in honor, and he was called Trismegistus, or thrice-great" (p. 14).

In the text of Köpke's *Sapientia Dei*, the image of Egypt, and thus his assessment of the Hermetic texts, were based on the Exodus narrative. Egypt served as the negative foil for the redemption story, and, in contrast, the religious and intellectual virtues of the Jewish people became evident. Despite all his dogmatism and his historical and literary ignorance, Köpke's

image of Hermes and Egypt was curiously original. He declared Joseph to have been more or less the author of the Hermetic texts, or at least the originator of the true core of these writings, thus allowing them a bit of their dignity. In his strict orientation to biblical *heilsgeschichte*, he cited Edward Stillingfleet (1635–1694). In his *Origines Sacrae* (Sacred origins), Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worchester and founder of Latitudinarianism, fashioned his critique of Hermeticism using Hermann Conring.

4. The Decrepitude of Hermeticism?

Bitter conflict erupted at the end of the seventeenth century over the legitimacy of Pietistic practices and the question of whether Platonic and Hermetic doctrines constituted the basis of Pietism. Although some Pietists defended Plato against the attacks of orthodox Lutherans, the dignity of Hermes Trismegistus seems to have been lost. Pietism was characterized by the antagonistically construed image of irreconcilable tension between pagan antiquity—the epitome of all that is worldly—and deep respect for early Christianity.

This narrow concept of *heilsgeschichte* did not permit Pietists to contemplate a humanistic reconciliation of Platonic-Hermetic and Christian traditions, as Ficino, Mornay, and even Franck had suggested. Because of Casaubon's critique, which Hermann Conring transmitted in his attack on Hermeticism, the Hermetic texts had lost their good standing. Among both the Pietists and the partisans of Reform orthodoxy, there were no advocates of Hermeticism, no one who was willing to stand, with Cudworth, and defend Hermetic thought.

Except for what concerned the quarrel over the historical roots of Pietism or Paracelsism, Hermeticism was ignored. Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714), a learned Pietist, in his *Kirchen-und Ketzerhistorie* (History of Church and heresy), written in 1699–1703, avoided any mention of Hermes whatsover, an especially striking omission in the rather lengthy passages devoted to Paracelsus. Arnold also made no mention of Plato and all the writers of Platonic-Hermetic Christianity. Hermeticism had lost its former status as the embodiment of the successful unity of science, rulership, and theology. In the context of dogmatic orientation to the Bible and Luther's verdict against "fanatics," Hermeticism had become nothing more than a foil for true belief and genuine wisdom.

The seventeenth century was the "*saeculum horribile*" of Hermeticism. First came the shattering of its legitimation legends and the concept of a primeval tradition of wisdom that began with Hermes Trismegistus, the Egyptian. Next, Hermeticism lost its reputation as a respectable science in the scholarly community. Up to the seventeenth century it had been possible to view Hermetic writings as compatible with contemporary criteria of scientific rationality. With the rise of modern science, however, the religious orientation of Hermeticism, with its ontology of the hidden and its semiotics of symbolism, prevented it from being a part of the epistemological basis of the modern natural sciences.

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1. See Frances Amelia Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964), chap. 21.
2. Anthony Grafton, "Protestant versus Prophet: Isaac Casaubon on Hermes Trismegistus," in idem, ed., *Defenders of the Text: The Tradition of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), pp. 145–161; German translation in Martin Mulsow, ed., *Das Ende des Hermetismus: Historische Kritik und neue Naturphilosophie in der Spätrenaissance* (Tübingen, 2002), pp. 283–303.
3. Cited in Grafton, "Protestant versus Prophet," p. 151.
4. Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678; reprint, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1964). On Cudworth's arguments, see Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), pp. 80–90.
5. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System*, p. 316.
6. Ibid., p. 317.
7. Ibid., pp. 320–321.
8. Ibid., p. 326.
9. Matthieu Beroalde, *Cronicum, Scripturae Sacrae autoritate constitutum* (Geneva, 1775), p. 23. Cited after Grafton, "Protestant versus Prophet," p. 154.
10. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 398.
11. Sylvain Matton, "Marsile Ficin et l'alchimie: Sa position, sa influence, appendice: La Critique de Ficin alchimiste par Nicolas Guibert (texte latin)," in *Alchimie et philosophie à la Renaissance*, Actes du colloque international de Tours, 4–7 décembre 1991, ed. Jean-Claude Margolin and Sylvain Matton, pp. 123–192 (Paris, 1993).

12. On Kircher, see Thomas Leinkauf, *Mundus Combinatus: Studien zur Struktur der barocken Universalwissenschaft am Beispiel Athanasius Kirchers SJ (1602–1680)* (Berlin, 1993).

13. See Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, "Hermes Trismegistos, Isis und Osiris," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 3 (2001): 67–88.

14. Hermann Conring, *De hermetica Aegyptiorum vetere et novo Paracelsiorum medicina liber unus* (Helmstedt, 1748), p. 178.

15. Ibid., p. 48.

16. Richard van Dülmen, *Kultur und Alltag in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Vol. 3, *Religion, Magie, Aufklärung 16. – 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1994), p. 197.

17. Hermann Kopp, *Die Alchemie in älterer und neuerer Zeit* (Heidelberg, 1886), p. vii.

18. A thesis that Garin had already adumbrated. See Robert S. Westman and James E. McGuire, *Hermeticism and the Scientific Revolution* (Los Angeles, 1977).

19. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p. 147; eadem, *Theatre of the World* (Chicago, 1969), pp. 20–59.

20. See Brian Vickers, "Okkulte Wissenschaften," *Jahrbuch 1986/87*, ed. Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Institute for Advanced Study (1988): 124–129.

21. Benedictus Nicolaus Petraeus, *Critique über die Alchymistischen Schriften/Und deren Scribenten/ihren neuen Projections-Historien, wie auch von der Materia Prima Philosophica und andern Dingen mehr, handelnd; So wohl mit einigen Anmerkungen/Als auch in der Critique selbsten vermehret, und von neuem ans Licht gestellt durch Friedrich Roth-Scholtzen* (Nuremberg, 1729).

22. Jean d'Espagnet, "Arcanum hermeticae philosophiae opus," in idem, *Enchiridion physicae restitutae* (Rouen, 1647). Later published separately as *Arcanum hermeticae philosophiae opus in quo occulta naturae et artis circa lapidis philosophorum materiam* [. . .] *sunt manifesta* (Geneva, 1653).

23. Michael Maier, *Arcana Arcanissima, hoc est, Hieroglyphica Aegyptiograeca* (n.p., n.d. [presumably London or Oppenheim, 1614]).

24. Anonymous, *Elucidatio Secretorum, Das ist, Erklärung der Geheimnussen, wie der Lapis Philosophorum funden, und die universal Medicin erlanget wirdt* (Frankfurt, 1610).

25. Anonymous, *Hermes in nuce, d.i. das Concentrierte Geheimnüss der Natur* (Hamburg, 1705).

26. Lukas Vorberg, *Zwey Opuscula Chymica*, Vol. 1, *Deren das Erste Elucidarius Purus Philosophicus De Universali Arcano; Sive secreto Naturae Summo* [. . .] (Breslau, n.d. [ca. 1650]).

27. Friedrich Roth-Scholtz, *Deutsches theatrum chemicum, auf welchem der berühmtesten Philosophen und Alchymisten Schriften*, [. . .] *von andern grossen Geheimnüssen der Natur handeln* [. . .], 3 vols. (Nuremberg, 1728–30), 1:7.

28. Pierre Hadot, *Zur Idee der Naturgeheimnisse: beim Betrachten des Widmungsblattes in der Humboldtschen "Idee zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen*" (Wiesbaden, 1982); idem, *Le Voile d'Isis, essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature* (Paris, 2004).

29. Anonymous, "Aus dem Tractat: das aus der Finsterniss von sich selbst hervorbrechende Licht," in *Hermetisches A.B.C. derer ächten Weisen alter und neuer Zeiten vom Stein der Weisen* (Berlin, 1779), pt. 2, p. 106.

30. Anonymous, "Apocalypsis Hermetis, Ab illustrissimo viro, Aureolo Helvetio, qui fuit Hermes Secundus, das ist: Von der Offenbarung des verborgenen Geists der Nature," in *Aureoli Philippi Theophrasti Bombasts von Hohenheim Paraceslsi* [. . .] *Opera* (Strassburg, 1603), 2:668.

31. Ibid.

32. Anonymous, "De Lumine Naturae," in *Aureoli Philippi Theophrasti Bombasts von Hohenheim Paracelsi* [. . .] *Opera* (Strassburg, 1603), 2:682–686.

33. Alexander von Suchten, "De tribus Facultatibus," in *Hermetisches A.B.C. derer ächten Weisen alter und neuer Zeiten vom Stein der Weisen* (Berlin, 1778), pt. 1, no. 14, pp. 214–215.

34. Anonymous, "De Lumine Naturae," p. 685.

35. Michael Sendivogius, *Chymisches Kleinod, Das ist: I. Zwölff Traktätlein von dem Philosophischen Stein der alten Weisen* (Strassburg, 1681 [1604]), p. 3 v.

36. Ibid., foreword, 2 r.

37. Jean d'Espagnet, "Das geheime Werck der Hermetischen Philosophie," in RothScholtz, *Deutsches theatrum chemicum* [. . .] (Nuremberg, 1729), 2:836.

38. Christoph Meinel, "Okkulte und exakte Wissenschaften," in *Die occulten Wissenschaften in der Renaissance*, ed. August Buck, pp. 21–43 (Wiesbaden, 1992).

39. Ehrgott Daniel Colberg, *Das Platonisch-Hermetische Christenthum; begreifend Die Historische Erzehlung vom Ursprung und vielerley Secten der heutigen Fanatischen Theologie, Unterm Namen der Paracelsisten/Weiglianer/Rosenkreutzer/Quäcker/Böhmisten/Wiedertäuffer /Bourignisten/Labadisten/und Quietisten* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1690). The citations that follow are from the Leipzig edition (1710).

40. Christian Friedrich Bücher, *Plato Mysticus In Pietista redivivus, Das ist: Pietistische Uebereinstimmung Mit der Heydnischen Philosophia Platonis Und seiner Nachfolger* (Danzig, 1699).

41. Balthasar Köpke, *Sapientia Dei in Mysterio Crucis Christi Abscondita: Die wahre Theologia Mystica oder Ascetica* [. . .] *Entgegen gesetzt der falschen aus der heydnischen Philosophie Platonicis und seiner Nachfolger* (Halle, 1700).

V Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Between Occultism and Enlightenment

In the course of the seventeenth century, Hermeticism and its eponymous founder lost much of their prestige. The distinction between deceptive surface and hidden core of essence proved irreconcilable with the newly emerging natural sciences. In the wake of the treatments by Casaubon and Conring, scholars no longer regarded the *Corpus Hermeticum* as primeval, divine revelation. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, we see nothing more of the bitter conflict that had raged in the seventeenth over the image of Hermes Trismegistus. Critical, distanced voices became more numerous. Indicative of this development is the entry on "Hermes" in volume 12 of Zedler's *Universallexikon* of 1735:

> Hermes, also called Trismegistus, a celebrated Egyptian philosopher. Some have proposed that he was Adam, others the patriarch Joseph, others Enoch, [. . .] and still others Canaan or Moses [. . .] Others believe that not a man but God himself is designated by this name [. . .] It is alleged that he was the first to turn away from astrology to investigate the other wonders of nature [. . .] The Egyptian name of the ancient Hermes, or Mercury, was Thoth. He was adviser to King Osiris in Egypt, and he is supposed to have invented the general manner of writing and also the hieroglyphs, along with the first laws of the Egyptians and various sciences. Clement of Alexandria states that he wrote thirty-two books of theology and philosophy, and six of medicine, all of which were lost, with the result that the remaining books bearing his name are considered to be erroneously attributed to him. Aside from those just mentioned, there is a book entitled

> *Poemander* [. . .], which Casaubon believes was written by a Christian for the purpose of winning over pagans.[1]

The author of this entry refers less to alchemists than to scholars, including Athanasius Kircher and Wilhelm Christoph Kriegsmann (1633–1679), who held that the *Tabula Smaragdina* was a Phoenician text. Although the author was aware of Hermes' legendary achievements and status as a prophet, he largely distanced himself from these opinions and followed Casaubon's late dating of the *Poimander* as written in the second century. Here Hermes Trismegistus is just a legend robbed of validity, and his texts are considered pseudepigrapha. Although the entry does not preclude that a real person named Hermes Trismegistus existed, the many opinions do not permit a definitive judgment.

The philosophical-theological Hermetica had lost their prestige, but the alchemical texts lived on. Although no longer meeting the scientific standards of the time, the "Hermetic Art" continued to enjoy enormous publishing successes in the eighteenth century. The authoritative image and purported writings of Hermes Trismegistus continued to be exploited in such books as the collaborative volume *Hermetisches A.B.C. derer ächten Weisen alter und neuer Zeiten vom Stein der Weisen* (Hermetic A.B.C. of the genuine sages of ancient and modern times regarding the Philosophers' Stone, 1778), Jean-Jacques Manget's *Bibliotheca Chemica Curiosa* (Curious chemical library, 1702), and Friedrich Roth-Scholtz's *Deutsches theatrum chemicum* (German chemical theater, 1728–1730). In these circles, Conring's and Casaubon's criticism was ignored. Few new books were published, however, so the image of Hermes remained that which was portrayed in the older writings. A book that appeared in 1720 referenced two sixteenth-century publications, Michael Maier's *Arcana Arcanissima* (The most secret secrets) and Jean Pierre Fabre's *Hercules Piochymicus* (Pious chemical Hercules):

> As the first king in Egypt, Ham, son of Noah, wrote a description of alchemy, kept it safe in the Chest of the Flood, and afterward brought it back to Egypt; and, after him, his son Migraim and his adviser Hermes at that time taught the same. For those who understand the art of gold reckon its antiquity to be great; indeed, they claim that Adam, the first man, was the originator of the Philosophers' Stone, and they

> indicate that God made its model by means of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; and also that the preparation of gold was pursued by King Ninus and his consort Semiramis; and that, among the Egyptians, it was written down by Hermes in hieroglyphic, that is, sacred, picture writing.[2]

The Hermes legends drew entirely on the images handed down from the seventeenth century, and writers largely avoided engaging the critics of Hermeticism, as Olaus Borrichius had done. This image of Hermes lives on even today in ever more esoterically inclined groups of adherents of alchemistic concepts with a predilection for the doctrine of microcosm and macrocosm. But, in the passage just cited, reference to the wise Egyptian Hermes serves only for self-reassurance and not to attract social recognition from critics and skeptics.

Along with this preserved Hermeticism, the eighteenth century saw the beginnings of a scientific examination of the earliest documentation of Hermetic texts. In 1742 Nicolas Leglet du Fresnoy (1674–1755) published his three-volume *Histoire de la Philosophie Hermetique* (History of Hermetic philosophy). Though the author produced a "history," he was concerned mostly with the alchemical myth of Hermes, especially because he understood the concept of "Hermeticism" as a synonym for "alchemy." Although "Hermetic philosophy" took its name from Hermes Trismegistus, du Fresnoy also calls it *chrysopée* (gold making) or *argyropée* (silver making), because the philosophy concerned metallurgy. As a historical figure, there had been a Hermes Trismegistus under the name of Siphoas, although the known Hermetic texts are forgeries. Du Fresnoy related a long, detailed history of alchemy, beginning with Hermes and ending in the year 1739, one that was largely critical of that history, recognizing many texts as pseudepigrapha. Because du Fresnoy writes of alchemy under the rubric Hermeticism, Conring and Borrichius are, of course, brought in as part of this history, but he also discusses Pico and Ficino. He confuses Giovanni Pico, however, with Pico's nephew, Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola, whom he acknowledges as the author of the pseudepigraphic text *On Gold.* Ficino is included in the history of Hermetic philosophy where it is erroneously stated that he was the author of the tractate *De arte chymica* (On the chemical art), with no mention of his having translated the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which plays scarcely any role here.

Similarly the *Dictionnaire mythohermetique* (Mytho-Hermetic dictionary), by Antoine Joseph Pernety (1716–1800/1801), seems from its title to be a reference book but is actually a large-scale apology for alchemy that employs the methods of mythoalchemy. In 1766 Pernety founded a "Hermetic rite" that included the three degrees of "Apprentice," "Journeyman," and "Master," and seven others as well: "True Mason," "True Mason on the True Way," "Knight of the Golden Key," "Knight of Isis," "Knight of the Argonauts," "Knight of the Golden Fleece," and the especially elevated degree of "Knight of the Sun."[3] Pernety later went to Berlin, where he became the librarian of Frederick the Great and translated the works of Swedenborg into French.[4]

1. Two German Editions of the *Corpus Hermeticum*

No German edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was published until 1706. Although Sebastian Franck had already translated these texts in 1542, he did not publish them. French and Italian translations were available at an early date, and even English and Dutch translations were on the book market in the seventeenth century.

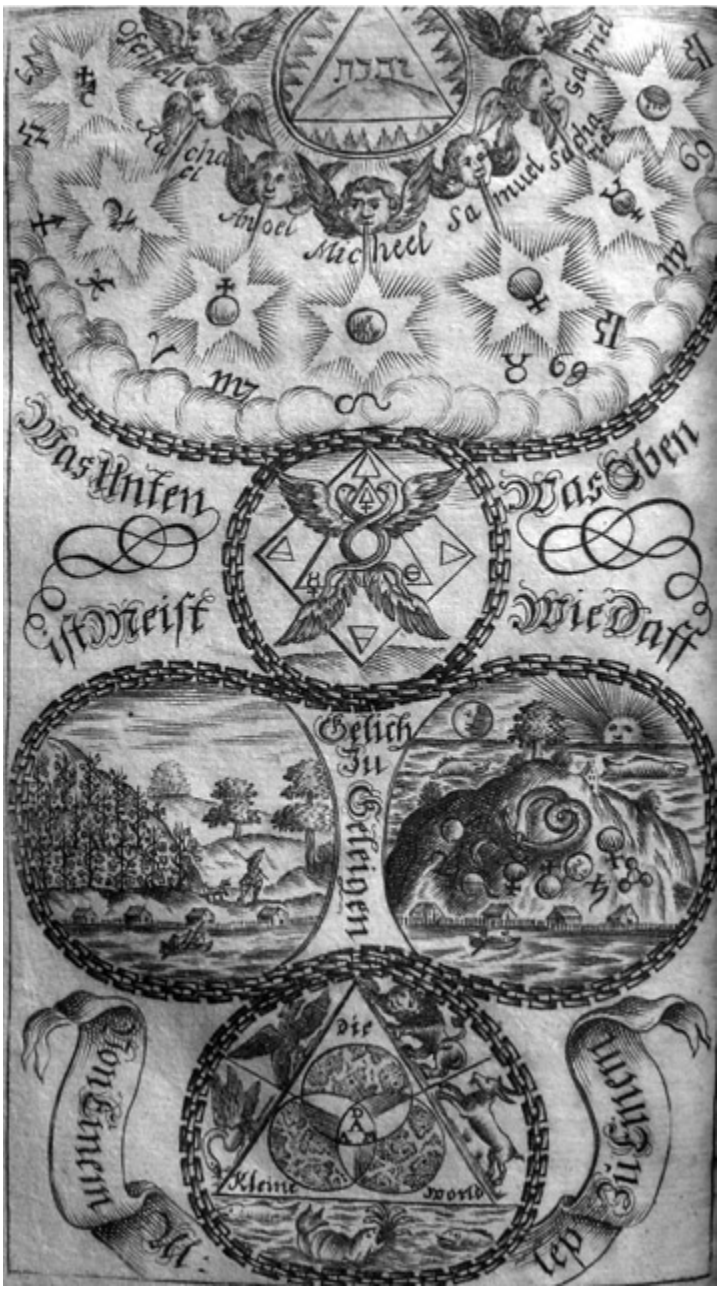
Using the pseudonym Alethophilus (lover of wisdom), Wolf Freiherr von Metternich authored the first German edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* basing his work on a seventeenth-century Dutch translation. For his image of Hermes, Metternich used the Dutch original and Patrizi's version of the Hermes legend, as well as the writings of Olaus Borrichius. What Metternich related was the well-known legend of Hermes, which recounted his major cultural innovations and acknowledged him as an eminent natural philosopher and theologian. Knowing nature meant knowing God, and his conclusion was that the essence of nature can only be understood as based on God's creative will.

While not even mentioning Casaubon's critique of the Hermetic texts, Metternich cites Olaus Borrichius to defend against Conring's attacks. There is nothing new here, neither in the debate with the critics nor in the image of Hermes. He knows that

> Hermes was a genuine man, filled with learning: as an excellent physician, as an expert chemist, and, finally, as a paragon of an

> authority on nature and on God, the great, the creator of all, who reveals himself in it.[5]

The narrative of the rescued primeval knowledge is a central motif in Metternich's enthusiasm for Hermeticism. The author is at great genealogical pains to make Hermes a direct descendent of Noah. But unlike Augustine and many other writers who stressed the primacy of the biblical over the philosophical tradition, Hermes here assumes a position of historical priority; the author denied the identity of Moses and Hermes, for Moses lived at a later date and was initiated into Hermetic wisdom in Egypt. The biblical Books of Moses are thus to be understood as heir to the primeval Hermetic revelation.



The opening statement of the doctrine of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, "What is below is like that which is above," was the motto of the first German translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. God, the archangels, and the planets are connected by a chain to the earthly realm and the elements. Alethophilus (Wolf Freiherr von Metternich), *Hermetis Trismegisti Erkäntnüss Der Natur Und Des darin sich offenbahrenden Grossen Gottes* (Hamburg, 1706), frontispiece.

Metternich viewed Hermeticism as an esoteric science, for in antiquity, the mysteries of Hermes Trismegistus were veiled "in strange figures of speech, roundabout expressions, and clever fables" so that they would be handed down only within the circle of the qualified and the initiated. This fact is also supposed to explain why the classical writers reveal no knowledge of alchemy, and why it is that only allegoresis can reveal the Hermetic-alchemical secrets hidden beneath the surface of the ancient myths. Like Metternich's entire image of Hermeticism, this concept of mythoalchemy is a legacy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

As conventional as the image of Hermes was, it was so original that it was transferred to the *Corpus Hermeticum.* To his foreword Metternich added a German translation of the *Tabula Smaragdina,* with which the image of Hermes was closely connected in alchemo-Paracelsism. But the Hermes legend and the *Tabula Smaragdina* were only the introduction to the *Corpus Hermeticum,* and thus to texts that were in fact not the object of alchemical Hermeticism. The *Corpus Hermeticum* was thus drawn into the circle of an alchemy that had always professed to be esoteric, so that the *Corpus* became, along with the *Tabula Smaragdina,* yet another dogmatic basis of alchemical Hermeticism. These adherents of Hermeticism sought no debate with the educated public of their time, as they unquestioningly accepted the validity of the Hermes legend.

An entirely different image of Hermes Trismegistus and his writings was offered in 1781, in the second German translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum.* This edition was prepared by the philologist Dieterich Tiedemann, under the commission of Friedrich Nicolai. Tiedemann translated the text but evinced no particular interest in the figure of Hermes Trismegistus. Agreeing with critics like Casaubon and Conring, he maintained:

> Regarding the Hermetic texts, so much care has been expended by the most important critics, it seems that almost nothing further is to be gleaned. By precise weighing of internal reasons and historical evidence, the greatest experts on antiquity have agreed that none of the texts we now have can be older than the fourth century of the Christian era [. . .] Additionally, that they had more than one author has not escaped the notice of the censor.[6]

Tiedemann viewed ancient Egypt as a land of "blindest superstition," a breeding ground of "fanaticism."[7] The texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* for him, represented all that he, as an adherent of the Enlightenment, struggled against. He thus used his translation to propagate Enlightenment ideas among circles interested in the *Corpus Hermeticum.* He thought that the adherents of esotericism would read his translation to learn something about the wisdom of the legendary Hermes. Tiedemann indeed translated the Hermetic texts in a way that gives them an Enlightenment veneer. A key example of this was his translation of the Greek word *nous*, which today is translated as *Geist* (spirit) in German. Tiedemann translated it as *Vernunft* (reason) or *Verstand* (intellect), two central concepts of the Enlightenment. The 1706 edition had translated *nous* as *Gemüt,* a basic concept in German mysticism. This concept, which was coined by Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme and defined as man's spiritual inner being that prepared him for knowledge of God, was understood to be present in the Hermetic texts. In Tiedemann's translation, however, there was no longer a question of supernatural, transcendent insight or divine revelation or emanation but, rather, the possibilities for human cognition. This was, of course, a radical reinterpretation of the texts that in no way corresponded to the intent of the writers of late antiquity or to the intent of the Neoplatonically inspired interpreters of the texts.

The eighteenth century thus witnessed two entirely different German translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum:* the Tiedemann version, notwithstanding that it entailed an extreme reinterpretation, was viewed as the philologically sounder German edition until the appearance of the German translation by Jens Holzhausen and Carsten Colpe in 1997. Metternich's (Alethophilus's) edition was the more widely read, however, for its use of language and because its supposed representation of primeval Hermetic wisdom appealed to the self-understanding of the esoteric readership.

2. Hermes Trismegistus in Freemasonry

The first half of the eighteenth century did not yet see Hermes Trismegistus playing an important role in Freemasonry: Solomon's Temple and the Knights Templar were still the most important historical references. The situation changed fundamentally, however, in the second half of the century.

A prominent contribution to the fundamental change was played by Ignaz Edler von Born, the Freemason and Illuminatus considered to be one of the most important exponents of the Austrian Enlightenment. He exerted determined efforts to make Freemasonry an Enlightenment institution. As Master of the True Harmony Lodge, he set up "seminar lodges" dedicated to the academic investigation of Freemasonry. Lectures given in these seminars on the ancient mystery cults as forerunners of Freemasonry were published in the *Journal für Freymaurer* (Freemasons' journal). The first contribution to this journal, in 1784, was an article by Born, "Über die Mysterien der Aegyptier" (On the mysteries of the Egyptians).

In his representation of the Egyptian mysteries, Born extensively paraphrased and quoted from classical and late classical sources on ancient Egyptian religion. He interpreted Egyptian culture as fostering protoEnlightenment scientific pursuits, and, indeed, saw Egyptian culture as a religion of science. The Egyptian priests had been in the service of an ancient Enlightenment, pursuing the single-minded goal of improving the welfare of the people. Freemasons, Born observed, should recollect the Enlightenment roots of the mysteries in order to promote a general revision of Freemasonry: "May superstition and fanaticism never desecrate our [lodges]!"[8] In his reconstruction of the "Egyptian mysteries," Hermes Trismegistus had a place of honor as founder of Egyptian science. Born's principal source was Diodorus, whose image of Hermes he adopted. The second Hermes was thus an important founder of Egyptian culture, for he

> improved the religious doctrine of the people, discovered the principles of arithmetic and geometry, introduced hieroglyphs in the place of symbols, and erected two pillars on which he [. . .] had the entire range of the Egyptian sciences engraved, in the fervent hope of immortalizing them. (p. 32)

Egyptian culture and its knowledge were lost, however, until Hermes Trismegistus appeared, deciphered and improved the hieroglyphs, and conveyed his knowledge to the priests. He founded an order devoted exclusively to the public weal, and he laid down strict regulations for its members:

> Egypt owed its splendor and fame to this man who restored its sciences and arts, which were retained long after. The welfare of the country increased daily, as it was guided by the wisest laws and ruled by leaders who belonged to an order whose basic rule was purity of conduct and beneficence, and who knew no other source of happiness and pride than to leave behind some monument to their care for the good of the land they ruled. The leaders were members of the priesthood and custodians of the mysteries, and with undivided interest, they safeguarded the religion and the state. (p. 33)

Born's image of Hermes Trismegistus did not include the concept of a special, divine knowledge. He wrote of human science, of a knowledge of this world and for this world. Born did not refer to the texts of Hermes Trismegistus, neither the *Corpus Hermeticum* nor the *Tabula Smaragdina.* But to this Enlightenment thinker, Hermes retained something of his role as preacher of an esoteric doctrine: aside from all the sciences practiced in secret, though there was nothing mystical or supernatural about them, the Egyptian priests also cultivated and practiced a special science:

> a [. . .] science [. . .] that was peculiar to the Egyptian priests alone, which they disclosed to none but him who was initiated into the innermost mysteries, which they buried deep beneath pictures and hieroglyphs [. . .] This was the Hermetic philosophy, which comprises magic and alchemy. (p. 72)

There was sufficient evidence that the Egyptians, in fact, practiced alchemy and magic, though knowledge of these arts had been lost. Born, a noted mineralogist responsible for mining activities, had developed a new process of extracting metals by amalgamation, and he seems to have had a practical, though not a methodological, affinity for alchemy. Born could report nothing further regarding the "Hermetic Art"—and this point seems not to have fit well with his thesis that the Egyptian priests were obliged to cultivate the sciences in the service of public welfare.

That Born respected Hermes, and went so far as to acknowledge the existence and effectiveness of alchemy, can be understood by considering the aim of his text. He wished to persuade Freemasons who sympathized with the Rosicrucians to join his program of a Freemasonry in the service of

the Enlightenment. Born also reinterpreted the role of Hermes, to whom the occultist Freemasons appealed: Hermes would retain the aura of founder of alchemy but would also be seen as the prophet of the Enlightenment.

Enlightenment thinkers had not always endeavored to integrate Hermeticism and its eponymous founder into their philosophical program. For example, Christoph Meiners (1747–1810), Professor of Philosophy at Göttingen University and a correspondent of von Born, argued against the Hermes legend and the philosophical Hermetica in his 1775 book, *Versuch über die Religionsgeschichte der ältesten Völker, insbesonders der Egyptier* (Essay on the history of the religions of the most ancient peoples, especially the Egyptians). According to Meiners, Hermes Trismegistus was a "mythic demigod" and could in no way be taken to be a historical figure. After establishing the contradictions in the accounts of this legendary sage, Meiners noted:

> He who considers all this together will not, I hope, think ill of me if I honestly declare that I know nothing of what Hermes was or what he did; or if I doubt whether anyone has ever known, or will ever discover it, and if I therefore hold all attempts on this point to be the most irresponsible waste of time. (p. 205)

Meiners refused to pass judgment on the medical and chemical books at that point. But he contended that the philosophical writings were erroneously handed down under the name of Hermes Trismegistus, and, agreeing with Casaubon's late dating of these texts, he maintained that,

> all these, without exception, are dominated by Platonic and even Neoplatonic, and in many cases, Christian, language and doctrines that no writer cited prior to the fourth century after the birth of Christ; that their customs and style of thought are entirely Greek, and we encounter no trace of anything originally Egyptian in them. (p. 224)

The Hermetic texts were thus, unquestionably, inauthentic, and concern with Hermeticism was appealing only from the point of view of the history of philosophy, particularly the various influences from late classical antiquity on this syncretism. The critical sources on which Hermeticism drew were Neoplatonism, Christianity, and Jewish Cabala. Like Colberg

before him, with his anti-Pietistic criticism, Meiners understood Hermeticism and Alexandrian Egypt as the origin of "fanaticism."

Hermes and the Gold-and Rosicrucians

Besides the Freemasons who were committed to the values and principles of the Enlightenment, many did not view the purpose of Freemasonry to be the "emergence of man from his self-imposed immaturity." The Rosicrucians appealed, inter alia, to ancient Egypt and Hermes Trismegistus in order to justify their own understanding of the purpose and goals of Freemasonry.[9]

In the twelve *Freemasonic Addresses to the Assembly of the Gold-and Rosicrucians of the Ancient System* (1779), which are attributed to Hans Heinrich von Ecker und Eckhoffen (1750–1790), one of the most enigmatic figures on the Freemasonic scene and later the founder of the "Asiatic Brothers," the Ninth Address is devoted to Hermes Trismegistus: "Address to the assembled brothers regarding the Hermetic philosopy, its antiquity, excellence, and usefulness." The address is introduced through a poem by Crassellame, a seventeenth-century alchemist, celebrating the "divine Hermes" as the author of the *Tabula Smaragdina* and the founder of alchemy.

According to the Rosicrucians, Hermes kept the Adamic primeval knowledge alive in the period after the Flood. For them, even Moses, depicted here holding a staff before Mount Ararat, along with the Ark and the broken tablets of the Law, stood in the tradition of Hermetic knowledge. Many Freemasons considered themselves heirs to this knowledge. From Hans Heinrich von Ecker und Eckhoffen, *Freimäurerische Versammlungsreden* (Amsterdam, 1779), p. 219.

The vignette at the beginning of the text depicts Hermetic knowledge as part of the biblical tradition and as rescuer of the primeval knowledge. In the center stands a pillar covered with characters that surely are supposed to be hieroglyphs. The tablet bearing the inscription “Trismegistus” shows that what is involved is the Hermetic knowledge that preserved the primeval Adamic knowledge after the Flood. The tale of the pillars bearing the primeval Adamic knowledge that Hermes Trismegistus revived had been part of the history of Hermetic tradition since antiquity. In Manetho’s tradition, we are told that the first Hermes recorded his knowledge in hieroglyphs prior to the Flood. On the left side of the vignette is the stranded Ark of Noah, and next to it, at the foot of the mountain, is Moses, who has just broken the tablets of the Law and is overseeing the burning of the Golden Calf. The image of the calf in the flames points to a supposed

biblical reference to alchemy: in Egypt Moses had learned the art of Hermes' alchemy, and so he was able to burn the Golden Calf into powder and change it into drinkable gold (*aurum potabile*). The pyramid in the background symbolizes Egypt as the origin of Hermetic knowledge, as in so many legitimation legends, especially in alchemo-Paracelsism.

In the address, this image of Hermes as rescuer of the primeval knowledge is unfolded and connected closely with biblical chronology. Shortly after the Flood, Hermes Trismegistus was an adviser to the first king of Egypt, Menes, who was a great-grandson of Noah. He was the most learned of all men in natural history, medicine, and alchemy, and he was a teacher of "hidden and secret sciences":

> The origin of the aforementioned philosophy was communicated directly by Adam and the Patriarchs, his descendants, and our Thoth, or Hermes, also learned it in this school. We have convincing proof of this in the Emerald Tablet, which agrees so precisely with the science of the ancient forefathers that there are no two things so resembling each other as these. (pp. 220–221)

Was the author ignorant of the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* or had Casaubon's and Conring's criticism had its effect? In any event, he mentions only the *Tabula Smaragdina* as the "single genuine piece we have from his learned workshop" (p. 221). But, especially since the book of Genesis is the oldest and the best evidence of divine wisdom in questions of natural philosophy, it is his opinion that philosophy must be based on it. The author thus proceeds to investigate the "principal basis of this system" (p. 224), and he sees it in the biblical teaching that the world is God's creation:

> As the first pupils of Hermes, the ancient Egyptians also believed this, and in this they differed from Aristotle and most of the Greek philosophers. [. . .] They believed in an almighty Architect, as they had learned from their fathers, the patriarchs. (pp. 224–225)

These are the very hermeneutic maxims that Ficino had introduced three centuries earlier. Egyptian-Hermetic wisdom and biblical revelation were two aspects of one and the same divine truth. But to the Rosicrucians, Hermeticism was no longer synonymous with Platonism. Platonic doctrines

during the Enlightenment were closely connected with the deistic concept of God, and thus were offensive to the concept of revelation emphasized in this version of Hermeticism. The dictum of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, therefore, was cited both to stress its similarity to the Bible and to distance it from Platonism:

> "All things were from the beginning, through the creative concept of a single One," which is, hopefully, clear and sufficient to refute the later Platonists, who fooled people into believing their opinion that the preexistence of matter was drawn from Egyptian sources. (p. 225)

This creative, preexisting entity was called "Hemphta" by the Egyptians. Obviously the Egyptians and Hermes Trismegistus were not atheists, who made their first appearance among the Greeks. "The reason may well be that they remained longer with the patriarchal teaching and Hermetic science that was so suited to lead men to God" (p. 226), whereas the Greeks, who had too much imagination, fell away from this biblical-Hermetic doctrine. In the seventeenth century it had been the Aristotelians who were suspect in the framework of the alchemo-Paracelsist legitimation legend; now, however, all of Greek philosophy fell under the verdict of heresy.

It follows from the *Tabula Smaragdina* that, unlike the Greeks, the Egyptians never believed in preexisting matter, and that the modern Platonists and fanatics were wrong in affirming that "matter proceeded from the essence of God and is to be considered a separated part of him" (p. 230). The world itself is a creation of God, as clearly indicated in Hermetic philosophy and the Bible, and not an emanation of the Highest Being. God revealed this knowledge to Adam, after which it was disseminated throughout the various cultures, and it remains alive among those who call on Hermes Trismegistus:

> This is the true, fruitful philosophy, which comes from God himself [. . .] [and] was taught to Adam, was transmitted orally via the patriarchs to Noah, and was imparted by his children and grandchildren to the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Chaldaeans, Ethiopians, Indians, and even the Chinese, and today is maintained by the genuine

> Hermetic philosophers who are the blessed members of our sacred brotherhood. (p. 233)

These Freemasons understood themselves to be part of a long chain, one that passed along revealed knowledge, combatted emanistic, deistic, and atheistic tendencies, and rejected a concept of autonomous reason. In the foreground was the connection between piety and science that we have often encountered in Hermetic writings. Alchemy, Paracelsist *tria principia* (three principles) doctrines, astrology, the correspondence between stars and metals—all these were part of this version of Hermeticism.

In 1779, the same year as the *Rosicrucian Addresses,* a similar conception of Hermeticism was articulated in the *Compass der Weisen* (Compass of the sages). The author, Adam Michael Birkholz, maintained that he was one of the "members of the inner Constitution of the genuine and right Freemasonry," and, with this book, he intended "to present, clearly and faithfully, the history of this illustrious Order, from the beginning of its founding."[10]

The mysteries reported in this book cannot be understood as the exclusive possession of a single lodge, for, after all, other sages of antiquity, for example, Hermes, Zoroaster, Orpheus, Plato, were not members of a single sect: "Their wise doctrines do not concern just the Order of Masons; they are for the entire human race" (p. 7). Concerning the question of the essence and truth of Freemasonry, therefore, it was less a matter of quarrels within the fraternity than of universal human questions: "True wisdom rests not on this or that society, not on ceremonies, not on the opinion of this or that Order; it must be accessible to each and every man" (p. 8).

The goal is "to acquire wisdom, skill, and virtue, to please God, and to serve one's neighbor" (p. 15). Especially suited to this end, one should be concerned with the triad of "mercury [quicksilver], salt, and sulfur" (p. 17), which is the Paracelsist doctrine of three principles. This originally Masonic knowledge had been increasingly forgotten, however, "and soon, all society no longer knew what its customs meant" (pp. 19–20). Now, a single lodge quietly cultivated this knowledge. Birkholz once again related the history of the tradition of Hermetic knowledge in its familiar essentials: Adam's primeval knowledge; its partial loss in the Fall; the pillars of Seth, on which this knowledge was recorded; the first Hermes, who was Enoch, and then Noah, with whom this knowledge survived. The Egyptian episode of

Hermetic knowledge received special elaboration: Mizraim, Noah's grandson, went to Egypt with some followers. Their leader was Menes, revered as Osiris in later, superstitious times. At that time he and the Egyptians lived honorably and according to the law of nature. False doctrine did not openly appear until the time of Moses. Menes'sister was Isis, who was instructed by Thoth, the king's adviser, especially in the sciences of alchemy, medicine, and natural history. Thoth was the second Hermes, "the most learned man of his time and the author of the famed Emerald Tablet, regarded by the Hermetic philosophers as a sort of chemical Bible" (p. 28). The *Tabula Smaragdina* was originally written in Phoenician, but in the time of the third Hermes, it was translated into Egyptian. The second Hermes was the successor of Menes and a wholly extraordinary man, who

> must have been a pious, honest man who lived according to the law of nature. Some writers thus rightly affirm that, after the Flood, he was the first to show men (especially, in all likelihood, the Egyptians) the knowledge of God and to reveal the mysteries of nature. (p. 29)

This revelation led to the establishment of "secret societies" that survived down to the Freemasons. The second Hermes also invented the hieroglyphs, to hide his knowledge from the profane and make it accessible only to the "sons of wisdom," as is still the case among the Freemasons.

The Greeks also were initiated into these secret societies, thus acquiring the wisdom. Following them into the societies were Abraham, Zoroaster, Ostanes, and many more. Indeed, Moses himself was the greatest alchemist. All peoples and sages stood in this tradition: Solomon knew all that is secret, Birkholz contended, for he had "all the signs of a perfect Hermetist" (p. 49) and was a great alchemist. In Greece Orpheus, who acquired his knowledge from the Egyptians, founded a first "fraternity." Even Plato's Academy was a lodge. With the Neoplatonists, however, the secret knowledge of the lodges declined until Robert Fludd revived it.

The guiding spirit behind these essentials is obviously the genealogy of Hermetic knowledge, which Patrizi had composed at the end of the sixteenth century to establish the dignity of the *Corpus Hermeticum.* But in the eighteenth century Hermeticism had become largely a synonym for alchemy and Paracelsist medicine.

In the Enlightenment period the concept of a divine, ever constant philosophy assumed clearly reactionary characteristics. Reference to the most ancient past no longer legitimated that which was new or eliminated dogmatic boundaries, as had been the case with those who made use of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries. Instead, it was a shield against the challenges of the modern period, against emancipatory concepts of religion, reason, and science. This philosophy was also, roughly speaking, the reservoir of ideas on which the esoteric currents of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would draw.

3. From Historical to Systematic Hermeticism

If, in the twenty-first century, we speak of Goethe's Hermeticism, it is not so much because Goethe concerned himself with Hermes Trismegistus or made intensive use of the *Tabula Smaragdina.* Rather, the term is used to designate Goethe's concern with alchemy and reasoning by means of analogies. In the preceding centuries these themes were counted as part of Hermeticism and considered to be innovations of the primeval sage. Now, however, although his name might still be mentioned, the myth of Hermes Trismegistus had disappeared from the consciousness of the educated public. Goethe had intensively studied texts that belonged to this Hermeticism, but we find few explicit mentions of them. Such a mention occurs in Goethe's letter to Ernst Theodor Langer, dated May 11, 1770: "Oh, it's a long line from Hermes' *Tablet* to Wieland's *Musarion.*"[11] In his *From My Life: Poetry and Truth,* Goethe confesses: "Neo-Platonism was its basis; Hermeticism, mysticism, and cabalism also contributed something, and so I built myself a very strange-looking world."[12] Here "Hermeticism" is a reference to Paracelsist and alchemical texts, and to a concept of God and nature linked with these texts, and less a reference to their supposed author, Hermes Trismegistus.

Thinking by means of analogies, the microcosm-macrocosm doctrine, and the Paracelsist doctrine of three principles could thus be understood as Hermeticism, for at times they had enjoyed a career under the patronage of Hermes Trismegistus. But they could also be tied to other major authorities, including Plato, Paracelsus, and Jakob Böhme, who were the protagonists in these discussions, and not Hermes, who was still invoked only in esoteric circles.

Nevertheless, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, discussion of Hermes Trismegistus did occur in two areas. Philosophers such as Meiners and Tiedemann, who sympathized with the Enlightenment, spoke of Hermes Trismegistus and his historical achievements as superfluous, and others, such as Born, in order to promote their Enlightenment program in occult circles, described Hermes Trismegistus as a proto-Enlightenment thinker.

Those who emphatically invoked Hermes Trismegistus were predominantly exponents of alchemy. Holding to a firm concept of positive divine revelation, they fought, in the name of Hermes Trismegistus, against atheism and deism. Thus they differed from Mornay, Franck, and others who earlier had used the Hermetic writings to promote tolerance, and also from Cudworth, who had used Hermeticism to argue for a pantheistic concept of God.

This history of Hermeticism has drawn on writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus and on texts that refer implicitly to his authority. Aside from esoteric groups that to this day preserve the old figure of Hermes, this history ends at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The concept lives on, however, if only under altered circumstances. Academic Egyptology has created an entirely new, historical basis for Hermeticism; at the same time the concept of Hermeticism has increasingly separated itself from the texts bearing the name Hermes Trismegistus, becoming, instead, a systematic concept.

While Napoleon's expedition to Egypt was largely a military failure, it marked the beginning of academic Egyptology. "Learned civilians"—academics who accompanied the Napoleonic forces with the task of documenting the Egyptian monuments—laid an important foundation for Egyptology as an academic discipline. Egypt, for them, was no longer the land of Hermes Trismegistus, the land where Moses was raised and out of which he led the People of God, but instead a strange and unknown land. Their task was to document objectively the relics of a bygone culture. Their observations of ancient Egyptian culture appeared in the *Description de l'Égypte*, a massive pictorial compilation with engravings that were extremely accurate in detail while displaying scarcely any artistic, imaginative elements.

The culture of ancient Egypt could now speak for itself. In 1822, a few years after the discovery of the so-called Rosetta Stone, Jean-François

Champollion succeeded in deciphering the till then untranslatable hieroglyphs on the basis of the Stone's inscriptions, which were written in hieroglyphic Egyptian, as well as Demotic and Greek. Now it was possible to understand the evidence left behind by the ancient culture itself, without the mediation of classical and late classical antiquity. At this point, however, the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus could no longer be understood simply as the embodiment of ancient Egyptian wisdom. The ancient texts revealed an intellectual world which, at first glance, had little to do with Hermeticism. No hieroglyphic *Tabula Smaragdina* or *Corpus Hermeticum* was discovered.

But there emerged a strange mixture of modern research results and Hermeticism, as we encountered it among the Rosicrucians: a combination of ardent belief in revelation; the idea of belonging to a select group of sages; contempt for traditional philosophy and its concept of reason; and the doctrine of microcosm-macrocosm—all providing fertile soil for theosophy and the esoteric.

Creuzer and Philosophical-Romantic Hermeticism

An example of these strange, nineteenth-century reinterpretations of Hermes Trismegistus and Hermeticism may be found in the orbit of Heidelberg Romanticism. Georg Friedrich Creuzer (1771–1858), the Heidelberg philologist and adversary of Johann Heinrich Voss, developed an original image of Hermeticism in his *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* (Symbolism and mythology of the ancient peoples), published in 1810–12. He did not endorse the writings of alchemo-Paracelsism but continued the learned discourse of an Athanasius Kircher. The chapter "On the Religion of Ancient Egypt" includes a lengthy paragraph that mentions Hermes:

> Having considered Egyptian religion from its realistic side as naturalism, we now turn to its idealistic side; for all the religions of the Orient are, on the one side, naturalism, or, if one will, materialism; but also, on the other side, more or less an idealism. If Osiris is a great "nature-body," if the independent life of nature as a whole is concentrated in him, embodied intellectual life is represented

> in Hermes, and therefore self-reflection, thought, and teaching and writing. (p. 101)

Creuzer found Hermes to be a "genius of the highest science and wisdom." But this Hermes also had two forms, as described by Creuzer. Etymologically Creuzer wished to establish that Hermes was, on the one hand, "the father of all discursive thought," and, on the other, also "Thoth, the father of the hieroglyphic writing system or of the total hieroglyphic, intuitive way of thinking" (p. 102).

Creuzer wrote a philosophical mythology strongly oriented toward Schelling's philosophy of identity. He viewed the history of religion as the process of the unfolding of the unity of the ideal and the real. Egypt, to his mind, was a culture of symbols, and beneath those symbols, we can discern Hermeticism as the embodiment of the ideal. This is precisely the concept that we have often seen in the history of Hermeticism. However, Creuzer argued quite differently from those who understood themselves as part of the Hermetic tradition; he was an academic who documented the sources, interpreted them in terms of his thesis, and, in the process, took contemporary Egyptological research into account. He often cited Champollion, the scholar who first succeeded in translating the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and he described and interpreted recently discovered ancient Egyptian monuments.

Creuzer saw Hermes as a philosophical symbol, an embodiment of the intellectual, spiritual, reflective aspect of ancient Egypt, and not as a predecessor or teacher in whose tradition one could follow. For the student of mythology, Hermes was an object of research, not a model. Creuzer universalized the image of Hermes so broadly that, to him, the image became the symbol of written culture: "What is in writing is Hermes" (p. 111). He therefore reinterpreted the Hermetic tradition as a general tradition of wisdom and writing, providing only a brief explanation of its cultural transposition:

> Thus, in the beginning, there were only four books of Hermes; these were the four Vedas of the Indians; they contained Hermetic wisdom. [. . .] Later [. . .] there were twenty-four, and then, in the course of time, as Iamblichus says, twenty thousand. That is, the Hermetic books were an ever growing legacy of the priestly castes. (p. 111)

For Creuzer, then, Hermeticism was simply another designation for the general tradition of wisdom that began with the Vedas, the sacred books of the Vedic and Hindu religion, written in Sanskrit, and then continued as an ancient Egyptian tradition. However, he did not connect this tradition directly to Hermes Trismegistus.

Divine knowledge had to unfold in the world in both an esoteric and exoteric tradition, and so Hermes assumed two forms: one, as Hermes, for the exoteric knowledge, and the other, as Thoth, for the esoteric knowledge buried in the temples in hieroglyphs and comprehensible only to the initiated. Creuzer translated the traditional image of Hermes Trismegistus back into the two original deities from whom Hermes Trismegistus had emerged in late classical antiquity. All historical and genealogical derivations, all questions of primacy or of the origin and originator of a philosophical or theological doctrine, were meaningless, for articulated in the history of religion were generally philosophical and anthropological truths:

> And if, in Hermes' *Poemander*, it is said of Hermes as it is said of Christ [with reference to John 10, 11 and 10, 14, as in Casaubon], the words might be Christian but the thoughts belong to that pure knowledge to which a favored, small group of men among the cultivated peoples had elevated themselves already in highest antiquity. What we therefore have in Hermes is a great, idealistic viewpoint, and we cannot deny that the spiritual emerged eloquent as a basic element and a major factor in the priestly system of the Egyptians. (p. 117)

Creuzer modified Casaubon's critique of the Hermetic texts by explaining all the literary evidence, whether the Hermetic writings or the Bible, as manifestations of a single philosophical spirit.

In Egypt, however, there was no pure idealism; body and spirit belonged together. Both sides had to be considered, and both views of Egypt, the ideal and the material, already existed in antiquity. Chaeremon, an Egyptian priest and Stoic philosopher, represented the materialistic interpretation. Tracing all Egyptian religion back to observation of the planets, he treated it as a materialism, a "physical religion" that integrated man, via destiny, into

the cycle of necessity. The other thesis was represented by Iamblichus, who portrayed Egyptian religion as a purely esoteric idealism. Creuzer wrote:

> We have in [Hermes] the idea (1) of spiritual beholding and knowing; (2) of active beholding, of revelation in the light (in the stars), light thought of as the mediation and bond between spirit and body; (3) the idea of creation. He was represented as a demiurge who created through the force of his spirit. Here, the connection between the real and the ideal, the mediation between spirit and body, is evident; here is the blending of the idealistic and the materialistic way of looking at things. (pp. 122–123)

Although Creuzer perpetuated the Hermetic legitimation legend, as did the Rosicrucian Freemasons, he challenged the meaning of Thrice-great Hermes and his writings, as did most Enlightenment thinkers. His Hermeticism, however, also was the result of the cultural unfolding of an idealistic philosophy. He was able to appreciate recent archaeological and philological results and to mix them with the writings of Iamblichus, Diodorus, and Plutarch to produce a new image of Hermeticism. Nonetheless his interest lay not in Hermes Trismegistus and the textual tradition leading back to this sage, but in describing a philosophical mythology.

Creuzer thus occupied an intermediate position pointing toward the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and toward a philosophically systematic concept of Hermeticism.

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1. Johann Heinrich Zedler, ed., *Grosses vollständiges Universal Lexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künste, welche bishero durch menschlichen Verstand und Witz erfunden worden* (Halle, 1735), vol. 12, col. 1736.

2. J. J. Chymiphilus, *Offenbahrung der Chimischen Weisheit* (n.p., 1720), pp. 5–6.

3. Karl R. H. Frick, *Die Erleuchteten: Gnostisch-theosophische und alchemistisch-rosenkreuzerische Geheimgesellschaften des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Graz, 1973), p. 503.

4. Sylvain Matton, “L’Égypte chez les ‘philosophies chimiques’ de Maier à Pernety,” in *L’ Égypte et la philosophie, Les Études philosophiques* (April–September 1987): 207–226.

5. Alethophilo, comp., *Hermetis Trismegisti Erkäntnüss Der Natur Und Des darin sich offenbahrenden Grossen Gottes/Begriffen in 17. unterschiedlichen Büchern/nach Grichischen und Lateinischen Exemplare[n] in Hochteutsche Sprache übersetzet/Nebenst vorgesetzter sattsahmer Nachricht und Beweiss von der Person und Genealogie Hermetis, dessen Medicin, Chemie, Natur und Gottes-Gründe/mit unterlauffenden vielen der Egyptier Weissheit/und unterschiedlichen anderen Curiosa berührende Passagen* (Hamburg, 1706). This and the following citation are from the unpaginated foreword.

6. *Hermes Trismegists Poemander oder von der göttlichen Macht und Weisheit, aus dem Griechischen übersetzt und mit Anmerkungen begleitet von Dieterich Tiedemann* (Berlin and Stettin, 1781), p. iii. Cited after Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, "Nicolai–Tiedemann–Herder," in Anne-Charlott Trepp and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Antike Weisheit und kulturelle Praxis: Hermetismus in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2001), p. 407.

7. Cited after Neugebauer-Wolk, "Nicolai–Tiedemann–Herder," p. 411.

8. Ignaz von Born, "Ueber die Mysterien der Aegyptier," *Journal für Freymaurer, als Manuskript gedrückt für Brüder und Meister des Ordens* (1784), 1:131.

9. The collection of older Hermetic texts, *Hermetisches A.B.C.* , bears the following dedication: "Hochwürdigste, Hochwürdige und Hochweise, Oberste und Oberen Vorsteher des Hocherlauchten uralten Ordens der geprüften Goldenen Rosenkreuzer" (Most reverend, reverend, and most wise, supreme and upper masters of the most illustrious and ancient order of the proven Golden Rosicrucians).

10. Ketmia Vere [Adam Michael Birkholz], *Der Compass der Weisen, von einem Mitverwandten der innern Verfassung der ächten und rechten Freymäurerey beschrieben* [. . .] in *welcher die Geschichte dieses erlauchten Ordens, von Anfang seiner Stiftung an, deutlich, deutlich und treulich vorgetragen* [. . .] (Berlin, 1782). The book was published by the same house as the *Hermetische A.B.C.*, and the latter volume includes an endpaper bearing an announcement of the book's publication.

11. M. von Herzfeld and C. Melvil Sym, *Letters from Goethe* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 18.

12. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, trans. Robert R. Heitner (Princeton, N.J., 1994), p. 261.

VI Twentieth Century

Systems and Esoterica

The term “hermetic,” in everyday speech, is understood to mean something securely sealed, from which nothing can escape and into which nothing can penetrate. When language and texts are practically incomprehensible, they can also be called “hermetic.” While these uses of the concept are surely derived from the ethos of secrecy that is a topic of many Hermetic texts, the term is mostly used today without reference to Hermes Trismegistus and the writings attributed to him.

It is with just this meaning “incomprehensible” that the word hermetic was employed in the twentieth century in the fields of literary studies and aesthetics. The term “hermetic” was employed in a pejorative sense by the Italian literary historian Francesco Flora, in his *La Poesia ermetica* (Hermetic poetry, 1936), to characterize the lyric poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888–1970), in which Flora saw an illegitimate borrowing from the language of French Symbolism. Until that time, according to Flora, there had been no such forms of expression in all of Italian poetry. By “hermetic,” Flora understood the use of analogies that were “watered down into a magical sign language.”[1] From then on, Ungaretti and his adherents were known as *poeti ermeti* (hermetic poets), though the term did not retain its disparaging sense for long.

Because Flora had objected that the hermetic style lacked a literary or poetic precedent, some writers attempted to document “hermetic forms of expression” in medieval enigmatics and glossematics, thus elevating the term “hermetic,” which originally had been used disapprovingly, into an expression of poetological self-understanding. In this way they devised a literary tradition with a style all its own. In the ensuing discussion of

"hermetic style" in Italian literary criticism, however, there was scarcely any agreement as to what should be understood as its essential features. The participants finally concluded that they had adequately addressed the object of their concern by making a distinction between the concepts "obscure" and "difficult." In the framework of this controversy over a history of "hermetic" literature, the texts discussed in the preceding chapters regarding the history of Hermeticism played no part.

In his uncompleted and posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory,* Theodor W. Adorno used the term "hermetic" to designate the character of art that is a "renunciation of any usefulness whatever, even if it were sublimated by the addition of human meaning."[2] Hermetic art, according to Adorno, is that which is "entirely involved in its immanent logic, and rigorously excludes consumability and social utility."[3] What is typical of hermetic art, its obscurity, its unintelligibility, is not its weakness, but a strength. Only when art entirely renounces society and its functioning can it be a force for criticism and a stimulus to social change:

> The hermetic works bring more criticism to bear on the existing than do those that, in the interest of intelligible social criticism, devote themselves to conciliatory forms and silently acknowledge the flourishing culture industry. (*Aesthetic Theory*, p. 145)

This total renunciation must also display itself in its forms of expression. It must not be easy to understand, in fact, it must be highly incomprehensible and thus offensive: "The much derided incomprehensibility of hermetic artworks amounts to the admission of the enigmaticalness of all art. Part of the rage against hermetic works is that they also shatter the comprehensibility of traditional works."[4] Adorno thus values the hermetic as a force for cultural criticism, one that draws its revolutionary potential from denial in the face of society.

Like the *poeti ermeti,* Adorno did not have in mind the Hermetica of late classical antiquity or the early modern period. For him, the most important representative of hermetic poetry in his time was Paul Celan. The conception of hermetic poetry occurred, as Adorno wrote, in the Art Nouveau period.

1. Julius Evola and Esoteric Hermeticism

Julius Evola (1898–1974), the "will-o'-the-wisp of the conservative revolution," wrote *The Hermetic Tradition* (1931) as an heir to esoteric Hermeticism.[5]

For Evola, "Hermeticism" was alchemy, for, in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Hermeticism was "directly connected with the alchemical tradition" (p. xv). The origin of alchemy was not chemistry, and thus not the alteration of materials for practical use, but rather "knowledge of mysteries."[6] Evola understood "Hermeticism" as the knowledge of processes of change that occur beneath a surface and must be understood symbolically. Evola wished to show the reader this world, the hidden world of change. For this reason the German translation bears the subtitle "Von der alchemischen Umwandlung der Metalle und des Menschen in Gold, Entschlüsselung einer verborgenen Symbolsprache" (On the alchemical transmutation of metals and man into gold, decoding a hidden symbolic language). Alchemical "change," in Evola's sense of the word, occurs in nature in the transmutation of metals and in the psychic world in the alteration of human personality. Evola did not mean, as C. G. Jung later did, that alchemy had primarily to do with a projection of unconscious psychological processes; rather, he affirmed that it had to do with real, physical processes of change that corresponded to psychological processes. The deciphering of symbols had an existential meaning, and he understood symbol not as a referential correlation between immanence and transcendence but instead as a world of its own. The symbols Evola mentioned had a historical locus and could only be explained by following his theory of cultural decline: "Modern civilization stands on the one side and on the other the entirety of all the civilizations that have preceded it (for the West, we can put the dividing line at the end of the Middle Ages)" (p. 14). The two worlds were more separated than connected, and any supposed genesis of the one world out of the other was scarcely to be discerned:

> For there are two worlds, one of which has separated itself by cutting off nearly every contact with the past. For the great majority of moderns, that means any possibility of understanding the traditional world has been completely lost. (p. 14)

Because the Hermetic tradition belonged to the world of premodern cultures, it is impossible to comprehend it using the heuristic methods of the

other culture, which are entirely alien to it—namely, the culture of the modern world and its ideal of the scientific method. To understand the Hermetic, we must separate ourselves entirely from that which constitutes modern man: "to understand its spirit, we need to translate it inwardly from one world to the other" (p. 14). We must not strive to achieve understanding in the objectivizing spirit of modern science, according to Evola, but instead give ourselves over entirely to this other world in order to understand it. This is no simple transition, no gradual process of adaptation; it is a sudden leap, entirely alien to the world in which modern man lives. The world we need to understand cannot be deduced from the world in which we live, and to describe the Hermetic is thus a leap into the entirely Other. Unlike many other adherents of the esoteric, Evola refers to the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum,* which are not only a topic of his book but offer a guideline to its interpretation (p. 16). Evola does not just develop his critique of civilization along the lines of the utopian ideal of an alleged Hermetic tradition; he understands himself as part of this tradition whose renaissance he wishes to effect. He does not argue in order to convince; his book is intended only for those who are ready to be guided by it. What he has written, he says, is a form of initiation: "Rather than being simply read, this book demands *study*" (p. xix). The goal to be attained is the discovery of a "new land whose existence was previously unsuspected" (p. xix).

Among many adherents of the esoteric, Evola's *Hermetic Tradition* is unquestionably valid and is viewed as an extremely important work on Hermeticism. For in esoteric circles there is always a demand not for treatments of the Hermetic texts from the perspective of history or the history of ideas but rather to perceive in them a "deeper, symbolic truth."

This interpretation of the Hermetic tradition is characteristic of many esoteric versions of Hermeticism. It clearly explains why esoteric Hermeticism can no longer be the object of scientific examination, as it requires loyalty and belief, which is incompatible with common sense or with today's traditional standards of rationality.

The investigation of Hermeticism from the standpoint of the history of ideas, culture, or memory is, in any case, unsuited to this objective, especially as the concept of Hermeticism expands enormously when certain heroes of the esoteric are revered as reincarnations of Hermes Trismegistus. Dieter Rüggeberg maintains, "The concept of the 'Hermetic' is traced back to the science of that adept whom the history of the occult knows under the

name of Hermes Trismegistus, and who has restored Egyptian magic to us in his incarnation as Franz Bardon."[7]

Contemporary adherents of the esoteric take the concept of "the Hermetic" or "Hermeticism" as a vague synonym for their own peculiar philosophy. This use of the concept occurred early and strikingly in the book *Isis Unveiled* by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). In the "Hermetic Brotherhood of Light," the "Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor," and other nineteenth-and twentieth-century groups that have called themselves Hermetic, "The teachings of Hermeticism" have been understood "as alternatives to the materialistically oriented science of causality."[8]

2. Umberto Eco's Hermetic Semiosis and Heinrich Rombach's Hermeticism

One of the most interesting attempts to understand Hermeticism systematically and derive it historically was made by Umberto Eco.[9] Eco distinguished between two models of interpretation. One stemming from Greek rationalism, has its determining epistemological model in "knowing by means of the cause." The rationality of this model rests in the construction of linear chains of causes and effects based on the principle of identity, which is expressed in the *tertium non datur.* "From these principles follows the method of thought characteristic of western rationalism, the *modus ponens:* if p, then q, there is p, therefore q" (p. 59). This is the basis of Western rationalism. Besides this model, there is, according to Eco, also a second one. Along with the concepts of identity and consistency, Greek thought developed that of constant metamorphosis, whose symbol is Hermes: the rationality of monocausal, irreversible linearity is constantly subject to the vortex of the boundless, the *apeiron.* Eco ascribes the two models to different periods of time. Rationalism was anchored in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, whereas the second century c.e. was the heyday of Hermes. This was the time when the various gods of different cultures were identified with one another, and, as a result, the foreign became comprehensible as another expression of the familiar. Isis and Demeter were one. This was why the Hermetists of the second century no longer obeyed the principle of the excluded middle. "Now, many things

could be true at the same time, even though they contradicted one another" (p. 62). Applied to literature, this means that, for the adherents of Hermeticism, there were many texts that told of the true God. If these texts contradicted one another, this only meant that they did not stand on their own, but that every word in them was an allusion, an allegory. These books must be scoured for a truth that lies hidden behind their superficial meaning and that tells of a hidden God. But, like the hidden God, the hidden meaning of these books can be only a single truth, one that lies beyond human truth and cannot be formulated in simple statements. Their truth is accessible only in visions and dreams, and through oracles, and it is communicated by the deity himself. An unknown God possesses a mysterious and deep truth that can be appropriately expressed and transmitted only if normal, objectivizing language is not used: "The gods speak [. . .] in hieroglyphic and enigmatic messages" (p. 63). Under the maxim "what is above is like that which is below," the world becomes an endless web of references, always pointing to something else but never to a single ground. Allegoresis must therefore lead into emptiness, for it does not allow for objectification. Eco stresses that, for men, the text is endlessly explicable, and there are no bounds to legitimate interpretation.

Eco's definition suits many texts belonging to the history of Hermeticism but not others. The resolution of the contradiction of immanence into a unity of transcendence belongs to the classical topoi of Platonic philosophy, which distinguishes between the essence of an object and its manifestations. The concept of a supreme principle beyond representability and objective knowledge also has its historical and systematic place in Platonism. It is Plato's doctrine of the "Idea of the Good," as he described it in the *Republic.* In this regard, Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and "negative theology" cannot be categorically distinguished from Platonism.

Heinrich Rombach applies the term "Hermetics" to a special form of philosophy, a philosophy of "impermeability, inaccessibility, incomprehensibility," which he sees as the antithesis of hermeneutics.[10] According to Rombach, Hermetics is based on a "sense of the abyss," beyond classical rationality. This Other is intangible but omnipresent. In his book, *Der kommende Gott: Hermetik—eine neue Weltsicht* (The coming God: Hermetics—a new world view, 1991), he writes:

> The dimension of the abyss is the hermetic. It stands behind all that is grounded and capable of being grounded, behind all that is changeable and tangible. Not only does it stand behind, it penetrates it and saturates it. (p. 17)

Rombach claims he is the first to have elevated this insight into a philosophy, into a "philosophical hermetic." Prior to him, only poets had expressed the "hermetic phenomenon." With this concept of the hermetic, Heinrich Rombach stands in the tradition of the use of the term in literary studies, as in Adorno and the *poesia ermetica.* He is not concerned with understanding the history of the Western spirit in the texts generally designated Hermetic but rather with a conceptualization that rests on common sense.

In the wake of Rombach's philosophical formulation of the hermetic and of Eco's derivation of it in the history of ideas, as well as Evola's esotericism, some writers have attempted to define and describe the hermetic as the tradition of the "wholly other," as something beyond the history of philosophy oriented toward Aristotle and Plato. Thus, for instance, Ralf Liedtke, sees in the hermetic a "traditional philosophy of difference" that is the root of "our identity-critical, eclectic, and syncretistic present." This philosophy makes use of an "entirely different type of reason" and has a "higher acceptance of logical incompatibility."[11]

Such a definition might be suitable for Hermeticism from the eighteenth century on. In this period occult and esoteric groups increasingly invoked Hermes Trismegistus. But this characterization is inadequate for Hermetic literature in the period up through the seventeenth century. Competent studies in the history of ideas, literature, and philosophy have reached different conclusions and have in no way tried to define Hermeticism as the "wholly other."

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1. Herbert Frenzel, "Formen und Ursprünge hermetischer Dichtkunst in Italien," *Romanische Forschungen* (1954): 136–167.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis, Minn., 1997), p. 74.

3. Theodor W. Adorno, "Engagement," in idem, *Noten zur Literatur,* vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main, 1965), pp. 111–112.

4. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* p. 122.

5. The citations here are from the English translation, *The Hermetic Tradition: Symbols and Teachings of the Royal Art* (Rochester, Vt., 1995).

6. So said Evola in a letter to his editor. This letter is in the archive of the publishing house Laterza in Bari. See Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, p. 15.

7. Dieter Rüggeberg, *Theosophie und Anthropologie im Lichte der Hermetik* (Wuppertal, 1999), p. 10.

8. For a typical definition, see http://www.demicron.de/Hermetik.

9. Umberto Eco, *I limiti dell' interpretatione* (Milan, 1990); German translation, *Die Grenzen der Interpretation* (Munich and Vienna, 1992). The citations in this paragraph follow the German edition; the passages are omitted in the English-language edition, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomingdon, Ind., 1990).

10. Heinrich Rombach, *Der kommende Gott: Hermetik—eine neue Weltsicht* (Freiburg, 1991), p. 17.

11. Ralf Liedtke, *Die Hermetik: Traditionelle Philosophie der Differenz* (Paderborn, 1996), p. 10.

Chronology

fifth century B.C.E.	Herodotus identifies the Egyptian God Thoth with the Greek Hermes.
first century B.C.E.	The texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are composed between the first century B.C.E. and the fourth century C.E.
	Antiochus of Athens is the first to hand down an astrological citation attributed to Hermes.
	Diodorus of Sicily describes the Egyptian Hermes as a legendary culture founder.
first century	Cicero mentions five gods and heroes named Hermes; the last was the legendary Egyptian Hermes.
	The *Cyranidi*, which were composed between the first and fourth centuries, contain magical-medical prescriptions under the name of Hermes.
	Philo of Byblos is the first to honor Hermes with the name Trismegistus, "thrice-great."
second century	Athenagoras of Athens is the first Christian writer to mention Hermes Trismegistus.
	A papyrus from the second to third century, now in Vienna, contains some fragmentary Hermetic writings.
	In the *Papyri Graeci Magicae*, some dating back to the first century B.C.E. but most stemming from the second to the fourth century, Hermes is invoked in magical and theurgical spells.
third century	Clement of Alexandria mentions forty-two philosophical and medical books of Hermes.
	Tertullian calls Hermes the teacher of all natural scientists.
	Zosimus of Panopolis refers to Hermes' writings for the spiritual side of alchemy.
fourth century	Lactantius sees clear correspondences between the theology of Hermeticism and that of Christianity.

	For Iamblichus, Hermeticism is an ancient Egyptian doctrine that harmonizes with Neoplatonism.
	Hermetic texts, including *The Ogdoad Reveals the Ennead*, are also in the Gnostic library of Nag Hammadi.
fifth century	Augustine condemns Hermes, and especially the apocalypse in the *Asclepius*, as heathen idolatry.
	Stobaeus records a number of older Hermetic fragments, including the *Kore Kosmu*.
	In a text later handed down under the name Augustine, Quodvultdeus refers positively to Hermes as a pagan witness of the Trinity.
sixth century	The alchemist Olympiodorus affirms that Hermes conceived of man as microcosm.
eighth century	Albuzar recounts the legend of the first Hermes, who set the primeval wisdom down in writing prior to the Flood; of the second, who later revived it; and of the third, who wrote alchemical texts.
	The *Tabula Smaragdina* is first attested in the *Mystery of Creation*.
tenth century	In the *Circular Letter of the Spheres*, Hermes is celebrated as the "Master of Wonders."
eleventh century	In the *Suda* there is an account of the doctrines of Hermes. Psellus knows the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the form in which it has been handed down to us.
twelfth century	In the sphere of the "school of Chartres," translations are made from Arabic, and there is renewed interest in the *Asclepius*.
	Hugo of Santalla translates the *Tabula Smaragdina* into Latin.
	The *Book of the Twenty-four Philosophers*, attributed to Hermes, offers definitions of the essence of God.
fourteenth century	Hortulanus writes a commentary on the *Tabula Smaragdina*.
	Berthold von Moosburg often cites Hermetic texts as authoritative references.
fifteenth century	Nicholas of Cusa cites Hermetic texts and is attacked as a Hermetic pantheist.
	Ficino translates the *Corpus Hermeticum* into Latin and views Hermes as the founder of a philosophical tradition of revelation.
sixteenth century	Franck views the Hermetic texts as ranking equally with those of the Bible.
	Patrizi sees Hermes as the second greatest sage, next to Zoroaster and far superior to Aristotle.
	Mornay, making use of the Hermetic texts, promotes religious tolerance.
	In the *Aurora Philosophorum*, the Arab legend of Hermes is adopted by Paracelsism.
seventeenth century	In alchemo-Paracelsism, Paracelsus becomes the "second Hermes" or the "German Hermes," who revived the primeval wisdom.
	Casaubon recognizes the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* as a forgery combining Christian and Platonic concepts.

	Conring declares that the Paracelsists are wrong in invoking ancient Hermeticism.
	Cudworth defends the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, some of which contain authentic ancient Egyptian doctrines.
	Colberg sees in Hermeticism nothing other than Platonic doctrine and the basis of the doctrines of the Pietists and other "fanatics."
	The Pietists deny any connection with Hermeticism and affirm that one can discern, in the Hermetic texts, a pale reflection of Joseph's deeds in Egypt.
eighteenth century	In the first German-language edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the image of Hermes from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century alchemo-Paracelsism and the *Tabula Smaragdina* is combined with the *Corpus Hermeticum*.
	Tiedemann, in his translation, undertakes an Enlightenment interpretation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.
	Ignaz von Born portrays Hermes as an ancient Egyptian proto-Enlightenment thinker.
	Rosicrucian Freemasonry adopts the traditional image of Hermes as a primeval sage and wages battle in his name against the Enlightenment and the modern natural sciences.
nineteenth century	Hermes, for Creuzer, is the symbol of wisdom and erudition.
	In many occult and esoteric groups the alchemo-Paracelsist image of Hermes is cultivated, despite criticism.
twentieth century	Ungaretti's poetry is designated *poesia ermetica*, and the concept is adopted by his adherents.
	Adorno recognizes a force for criticism in the immanent logic of hermetic works of art that elude consumability.
	Evola understands Hermeticism as the entirely "other," premodern world that cannot be judged by the rational criteria of our own age.
	Eco defines Hermeticism as the tradition that has attempted to think the *tertium datur*.

Glossary

Agathodaimon The "goodly spirit" was a Greek god who gave oracles. In the Ptolemaic period he was identified with Shai, the Egyptian personification of fate, and in the Roman period was worshiped especially in Alexandria.

astromedicine Therapeutic practices based on the concept that the stars affect the human body and can cause illnesses.

decans Constellations or parts of constellations. In ancient Egypt their rising or their position on the ecliptic divided the night into twelve hours.

demons Demons, from Plato on, were intermediaries between God and man, responsible, inter alia, for prophecy.

elements (Aristotelian doctrine of) The four elements consist of primal matter, devoid of form and quality, and the dual combination of four qualities: earth (cold and dry), water (cold and damp), air (damp and warm), and fire (warm and dry). If one of the qualities changes, one element transforms into another.

emanation The gushing or radiating of the ontically lower from the higher. The higher, divine substance allows the cosmos to emanate from it in descending stages, without thereby being diminished itself. Each stage derives its being and rank from the one above it, and being and rank progressively diminish with greater distance from the source of being.

Enoch The son of Cain, sometimes identified with Hermes in the Hermetic texts. Unlike his father and son, Enoch was supposed to have had a "brief" lifetime of 365 years. He did not die, however, but was "translated" by God. A rich apocalyptic literature bears the name Enoch (Books of Enoch).

Ether The Ether, from classical antiquity on, was interpreted as the divine, highest region of the heavens. Aristotle described it as the fifth, celestial entity (see *Quinta Essentia*). In Neoplatonism the Ether was understood

to consist of light, heavenly, living, and celestially fine matter, of which demons consist, and which conveyed souls into earthly bodies.

Horus This ancient Egyptian god was at first worshiped as a sky god; later the reigning king was considered to be an incarnation of Horus. As the son of Isis and Osiris, he avenged the murder of his father and killed Seth.

intelligible That which can be comprehended by human reason, in contrast to that which is perceived by the senses.

interna rerum The heart, the essence of things, which cannot be directly discerned at their surface, though it is not necessarily distinct from their appearance.

Isis An Egyptian goddess who was the sister and wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus. In late classical antiquity the Isis mysteries, in which Isis was revered as All-Goddess, spread throughout the Roman world.

mantic The art of reading the future or the will of God. A distinction is made between natural, enthusiastic mantic, in which a seer speaks in ecstasy, and artificial mantic, the interpretation of signs.

Menes The first, legendary king of Egypt, whose historicity is unlikely and whose name is not attested until the New Kingdom. Greek writers such as Herodotus and Diodorus made him out to be the legendary founder of Egyptian culture.

metallurgy Extraction, processing, and transmutation of metals, especially in connection with mining in the early modern period. In alchemy it also entailed the making of gold (*chrysopoeia*).

mythoalchemy The concept that the classical myths are symbolic accounts of alchemy. In mythoalchemical allegoresis, for example, the *Iliad* is explained as an account having to do with the Philosophers' Stone.

natal chart Position of the stars at birth from which the destiny of man, especially his existence on earth, can be read.

negative theology The doctrine according to which statements regarding the essence of God can only be expressed in the negative, for God cannot be described in finite, discursive human language.

Ogdoad. The eighth celestial sphere, situated beyond the seven planets known at that time.

ontotheology This philosophy, in its narrower sense, is understood as the "inferring of the Supreme Being through mere conceptions, without the aid of experience" (Kant). In Western philosophy, Heidegger attempted

to discern essentials of ontotheology, understanding it to be the unity of ontology and theology.

Osiris The ancient Egyptian god who was worshiped as ruler of the netherworld. The deceased king was believed at first to be Osiris, although later every individual could become an Osiris after death. In the myth of Osiris, as handed down by Plutarch, Osiris was killed by Typhon, and his death was later avenged by his son, Horus; Osiris's scattered body parts were collected by Isis.

panacea A universal cure that is effective against all illnesses, rejuvenates the human body, and can also transform base metals into precious ones.

pantheism Doctrine according to which God and nature are identical. If nature is understood pantheistically, all being is in God, without God's merging into the world.

Philosopher's Stone (lapis philosophorum) This substance, sought after by alchemists, was believed to be capable of transforming metals, curing illnesses, and prolonging life; it was sometimes considered to be a universal medium of redemption.

physicotheology The endeavor to infer the nature of the creator, that is, God, from the order, beauty, and efficacy of the world.

pneuma The Holy Spirit as breeze. The concept of incorporeal spirit is derived from the original meaning "breath" or "wind."

pseudepigrapha Writings that do not stem from the author to whom they are attributed.

Quinta Essentia The fifth, celestial element of the heavenly spheres (see *Ether*). The quintessence, from the Middle Ages on, was considered to be the substrate of all matter and could be obtained through distillation.

Serapis A late Egyptian-Hellenistic deity whose name derives from the names Osiris and Apis. In late antiquity, the cult of Serapis spread throughout the western world, especially in Rome.

Seth The ancient Egyptian god considered to be the murderer of Osiris and the opponent of Horus; he is not to be confused with the like-named third son of Adam.

sublunar/supralunar Beginning epecially with Aristotle the cosmos was thought to be a ball consisting of concentric spheres. The supra-or translunar region (the region beyond the moon) is characterized by an ideal, circular orbit and consists of the "fifth element," the *Quinta Essentia.* In the sublunar region (the region below the moon) all bodies

consist of the four elements, and are subject to coming into being and perishing.

syncretism A combination of heterogeneous philosophical doctrines that is never, or only seldom, systematically expressed.

Tat Originally Tat was probably a writing of Thoth. In (pseudo-)Manetho, Tat was the son of the second Hermes and the grandson of Agathodaimon. In the Hermetic texts he was considered to be the disciple and successor of Hermes Trismegistus.

theurgy A technique or ritual for entering into a relationship with the gods or higher powers and placing them at one's service.

Three Principle doctrine The doctrine, introduced by Paracelsus, according to which all materials are composed of the principles salt, sulfur, and quicksilver; it coexisted with the Aristotelian doctrine of the elements. The doctrine of sulfur and quicksilver, which had earlier been the common one, was applied only to metals.

Typhon Son of the earth goddess Gaia and personification of the netherworld, Tartarus. In the Graeco-Roman period he was identified with Seth, Osiris's murderer.

verbum internum The inner word, explained as the truth that is anchored in individuals, with special reference to the prologue of the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." For Augustine, the inner word, which "is present in the soul," precedes the phonetic word, and the inner word, which "is elevated over the diversity of languages," underlies the phonetic word.